STREET AND SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

10¢
SEPT. 23
1939

RANCHO DEL DIABLO

A Book-length Novel

By TOM ROAN

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW FAST!
Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!
Charles Atlas
An actual, untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner of the title, "The World's most perfectly developed man"—who offers you this 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER.
J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' California pupils.

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Dept. 62J, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

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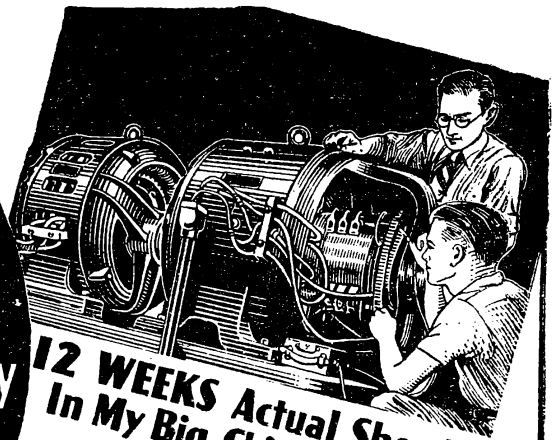

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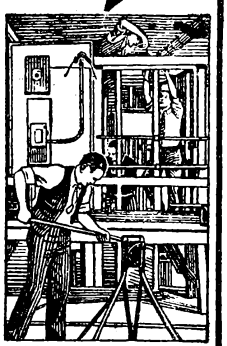

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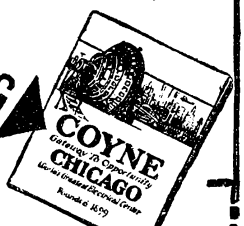

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COYNE

ELECTRICAL SCHOOL

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STREET & SMITH'S

WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE

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10c per COPY
$2 Six Months
$4 per YEAR

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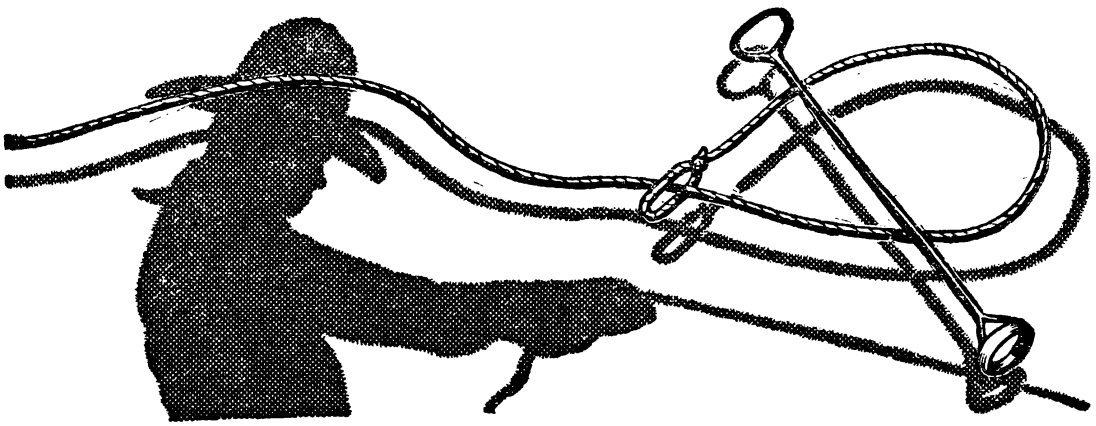


The Roundup

C. G. WILLIAMS, M. E., of Davenport, Iowa, has taken exception to George Cory Franklin's statement in his article on Ox Frames, which we published in our July 1st issue. Mr. Franklin said: "Even in the lumber camps the tractor and the truck have supplanted the picturesque teams familiar to the old-timer." We are of the opinion that the implication here was of a more or less general nature, much as one might say that the automobile has supplanted the horse and buggy nowadays, and that it was not the author's intention to state definitely that such a condition existed in every lumber camp throughout the land. Nevertheless, we were mighty glad to hear from Mr. Williams, and his firsthand information concerning this subject has proved so interesting and colorful that we take pleasure in passing it on to the members of our Roundup. Mr. Williams has this to say:

"If your informant and writer of the short article, 'Ox Frames,' Mr. George Cory Franklin, had but traveled in a slightly wider radius, he would have found that ox teams are used in Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas, as well as in southern Montana, for handling logs, and that it is still a common sight in those States to see from four to sixteen yoke of oxen (sometimes bulls) yoked to a log wagon on which may rest as a bottom tier two black gum logs up to six feet in diameter and anywhere from fourteen to twenty-four feet long. Nested between them may be seen a third log of equal size or perhaps two smaller logs and a fifth log on top.

"The wheels on these ponderous wagons are but sections of gum or cottonwood logs eighteen to twenty-four inches thick, sawed off the butt of some tree and hewed round, then bored out in the center to hold the cast-iron skeins which fit on the axles.

"Generally a log is selected that seems to have the grain running lengthwise of the log in a twist, as the wood grain will then be eaty and the wheels will not check in seasoning.

"Of course, where oxen are used one will always find, somewhere in the neighborhood, one or more sets of 'ox frames' at the local blacksmith shops, and the blacksmiths at those points are very proud of their ability to shoe oxen.

"In the western part of Wyoming

and Montana today one will find freighters using ox teams to haul supplies to some out-of-the-way mining camps or some town that may be a hundred miles from a railroad. Oxen are slow but sure. Their feed costs nothing and they will 'snake' a load where a tractor or even a 'caterpillar' cannot go.

"A few years ago in Tennessee I was walking up a country road. For some time I had heard a low moaning sound coming down the draw and as I turned a bend in the road I could see a bull team pulling a load of logs. The team consisted of six yoke of bulls, big rangy fellows, and the load was five logs, varying from six feet in diameter down to two feet, all apparently out of one tree. The two largest logs were about sixteen feet long.

"The moaning sound came from the bulls, which were walking slowly along, heads down and tongues hanging out, and all emitting that low, complaining sound.

"As I came up to one side of a cut about fifteen feet deep, down which ran a stream of water, the bulls came up on the other side to a place where the bank had been cut down for a crossing since the wooden bridge would not carry such a load. As they came into the water, the lead bulls turned short up the stream and the others followed, cramping the wagon sharply but not overturning it, until all of the bulls stood in the bottom of the creek up to their knees in water.

"After they had quenched their thirst and thrust their heads down into the water until it covered their ears, they started up the creek bed to a point where the bank was not quite so steep. There the leaders started up the bank. They seemed literally to top that bank on their knees, but the others followed and as they came up onto the solid ground, got all four feet under themselves to stretch out and pull. Each yoke in turn came up on their knees with the wagon following so slowly that at times it did not seem to be moving at all. But finally it topped that fifteen-foot bank onto solid ground and then down to the road where the bulls took up their strain of moaning as they moved slowly toward the river.

"It is not believed that a tractor has ever been made that could have hauled that load of green logs across the creek at the regular crossing, and no two have ever been made that could have pulled it up that bank out of the creek as those bulls snaked it."

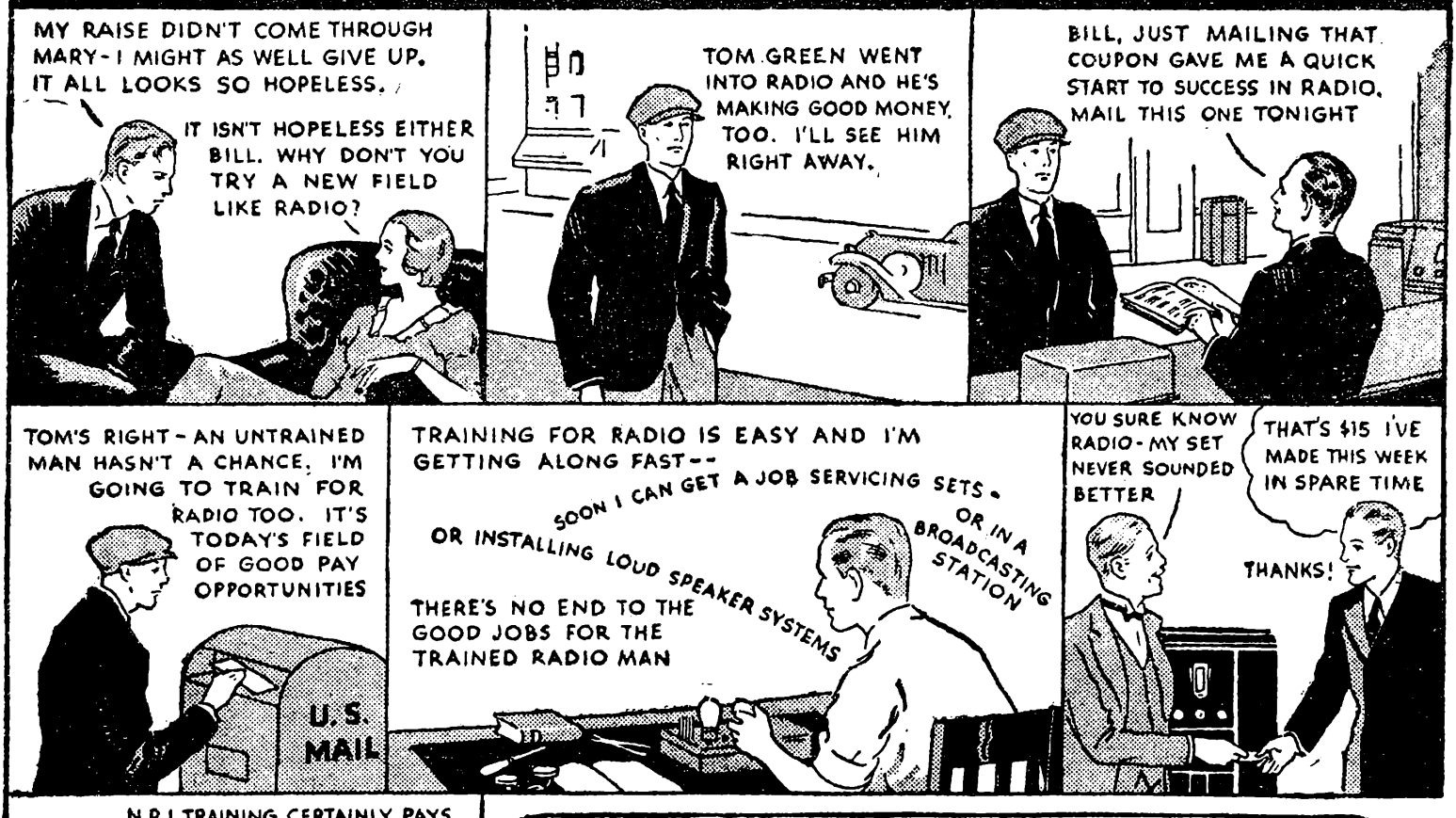
Coming next week—

For adventure and swashbuckling excitement you can't beat the life of a lumberjack. Kenneth Gilbert, in his newest novel, KINGS OF ROARING RIVER, makes good use of the thrilling background of the great logging camps of the North to write one of the most colorful and dramatic stories Western Story Magazine has ever presented. Watch for this saga of the winning of a timber empire.

He could dish it out, but could he take it? That's what Johnny Dice's pards wondered when he got caught out in his long underwear and had to pretend he was a bleating woolly. Bennett Foster gives you a clue to the outcome of Johnny's troubles by calling this laugh-tickler JOHNNY TAKES THE CURE.

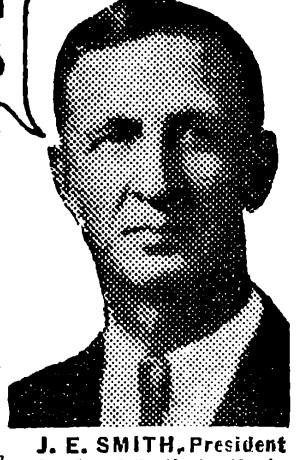
Besides these featured stories, next week's issue is chock-full of other top-notch fiction, articles and features, and, needless to say, all your favorite departments.

HE THOUGHT HE WAS LICKED—THEN A TIP GOT BILL A GOOD JOB!


MY RAISE DIDN'T COME THROUGH MARY—I MIGHT AS WELL GIVE UP. IT ALL LOOKS SO HOPELESS.
IT ISN'T HOPELESS EITHER BILL. WHY DON'T YOU TRY A NEW FIELD LIKE RADIO?
TOM GREEN WENT INTO RADIO AND HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY. TOO. I'LL SEE HIM RIGHT AWAY.
BILL, JUST MAILING THAT COUPON GAVE ME A QUICK START TO SUCCESS IN RADIO. MAIL THIS ONE TONIGHT
TOM'S RIGHT—AN UNTRAINED MAN HASN'T A CHANCE. I'M GOING TO TRAIN FOR RADIO TOO. IT'S TODAY'S FIELD OF GOOD PAY OPPORTUNITIES
U.S. MAIL
TRAINING FOR RADIO IS EASY AND I'M GETTING ALONG FAST—
SOON I CAN GET A JOB SERVICING SETS, OR INSTALLING LOUD SPEAKER SYSTEMS OR IN A BROADCASTING STATION
THERE'S NO END TO THE GOOD JOBS FOR THE TRAINED RADIO MAN
YOU SURE KNOW RADIO—MY SET NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THAT'S $15 I'VE MADE THIS WEEK IN SPARE TIME
THANKS!

N.R.I. TRAINING CERTAINLY PAYS. OUR MONEY WORRIES ARE OVER AND WE'VE A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO.
OH BILL, IT'S WONDERFUL YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME
In Your Spare Time For A GOOD RADIO JOB



Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay well for trained men. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many $200 to $500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, in good-pay jobs with opportunities for advancement. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loudspeaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

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famous explorer, presented
each of his friends with
curious little clay bricks—the
receipt of which always led to murder.

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The Avenger's friend received one—
Then the trail led to treasure—
Through a most baffling mystery.

It's a story of high adventure
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pretty as a Dresden doll, but
as tough and clever with
her hands as a top-notch
wrestler or boxer.

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RANCHO DEL DIABLO

By TOM ROAN

CHAPTER I

BUZZARDS TAKE WINGS

MID-MORNING heat waves shimmered fiercely and hung in gauzy blue veils over the great valley. Under the blinding Southwest sun, the weather-cracked old buckboard in which the two men were riding was like a lop-sided black beetle being dragged slowly by two shaggy white Texas mustangs along the ever twisting streak of sandy trail that led through the riotous seas of dull-green brush and scattered thickets of scrub oak.

"That's it ahead, Mr. Marshall," croaked the elder of the two men, a tall, funereal figure in his black broadcloth. He lifted his long buggy whip to point, and the wrinkles of his beardless lips cracked open to show the glint of enormous false teeth. "That's your heritage from the late Oklahoma George Lee."

He turned his head and looked at the tall, well-knit man of about twenty-eight who sat beside him. Buck Marshall looked back at him. For a moment he thought he was looking at hot pin points of blue steel in the keen old eyes under the broad black brim of Lawyer Deeth Ranger's big hat.

Then Marshall glanced along the pointing whip. Towering mountains appeared to leap out of the heat in the distance, one ragged range upon another, the colors ever-changing, indescribable, the hot sky an inverted dome of smooth silver shining above them. Marshall nodded, but he could not yet see anything to account for Ranger's strange attitude.

"*Sierras de Cielo*—the Mountains of Heaven," explained the lawyer. "From the distance they're beautiful. Sometimes there's ice up there in the mornings, but they're never too cold to keep the ghosts from walking and the hot blood from running at the Misión del Estrella. Take a squint at it through my old binoculars, there in that black pouch at your feet."

Marshall felt his face tightening. There was something about this Deeth Ranger's voice that made a man wince. It had struck Marshall from the moment he stepped off the down-river stage last night in Los Chinos, the little town now lost in the seas of brush and scrub oak a dozen miles behind them. The voice was too much like the croak of a buzzard, and there was something about Ranger that looked like a buzzard, too. The flapping tails of the man's long coat that hid a pair of black six-shooters, and even the slow flap of the wide-brimmed hat, stirring in an occasional gust of hot wind, reminded one of the beat of black wings about to take to the air.

"Take a good look," Ranger said dismally. "Nobody disputes the blood flowing up there, but being from the cattle country of Montana, sir, you may not believe in the ghost tales. But you probably will before you've spent a night at the Ranch of the Devil, as we folks have learned to call it these days instead of using the prettier name of Misión del Estrella—the Mission of the Little Star."

MARSHALL picked up the binoculars. In blue serge, high-heeled black boots and a wide-brimmed white hat, he looked every inch a Westerner. Hard years in the saddle on the Powder River range lands of his father's old Four-in-Hand cattle and horse ranch had built him into a man whose hundred-and-eighty-pound frame held

a powerful reserve of strength. His face was ruddy with health, and while his eyes were usually candid and friendly, they could, on occasion, look as unyielding as blue-tinged steel.

"Put the glasses on that big mesa between the two peaks that look like bloody thumbs," Ranger directed. "The trees surround the houses. The largest one is, of course, the original old mission, built 'way back yonder when the Spaniards came. Not much changed since it was sold to your uncle."

Marshall could see it after a minute. It looked like a great cathedral in the sky. Its high, mud-plastered white walls and age-old windows showing through the trees were like those of some ancient castle frowning down on the great valley for countless miles around.

"The old Spanish padres built well when they built." Ranger chuckled. "The Indians in those days must have— *Whoa!* What the hell!"

A sudden bend in the trail had brought the buckboard to the rim of a wide, shallow arroyo. The glasses were jerked roughly away from Marshall's eyes, and he was almost thrown off the seat as the horses snorted and swerved wildly to the left. Before Ranger could stop them, the lunging animals dragged the old vehicle hard into a wall of brush and halted only when the left front wheel was caught between two small trees growing close together.

Then Marshall saw the buzzards. A great swarm of them came soaring up from the bottom of the arroyo, their beating wings flapping in another gust of hot wind, their startled croaking filling the air with a dismal sound.

"Something's dead down there!" Deeth Ranger declared. "From the looks of things I'd say whatever it is it has been there all morning, and maybe longer, though buzzards don't wait long before they'll hit dead meat in these parts. Sometimes they don't wait for it to be really dead. Let's get out, Marshall. I reckon these fool horses won't run off, now that the worst is over."

"I can see what it is!" exclaimed Marshall, standing with one hand gripped to the back of the old seat for support. "Just drive on down the slope. There's a dead man in the trail down there!"

THE team of grays, once calmed from their sudden fright, gave them no more trouble. They merely shied around the blood-soaked body and were pulled to a halt a few rods farther on. Marshall leaped out of the buckboard and ran back to examine the gruesome figure lying on its face in the middle of the trail.

It was the body of a man of about forty, short, thick-chested, wearing the usual Southwest cowpuncher garb from boots to bull-hide chaps. In the short tangle of wiry beard on his left cheek there was a gaping bullet hole. Another hole was almost squarely placed between his shoulders, a third in his left side, and as Marshall rolled the body over he saw that there was a fourth wound in the right side of the stomach.

"Ambushed!" exclaimed Marshall as Ranger came walking back from the buckboard with the tails of his coat flapping. "Dry-gulched early this morning or during the night; shot down from every direction! But why in the devil did they have to kill his horse?" He looked at a handsome sorrel lying dead at the edge of the trail. "Men don't usually shoot down a man's horse just be-

cause they want to kill the man!"

"Unless," suggested Ranger softly, "the horse bolts at the sounds of the shots and they think it might be carrying something on his saddle that they want."

"Then you think it was robbery?"

"Um-m-m, hardly, sir, hardly." Ranger scratched his chin. Marshall could have sworn that there was a wicked smile in the man's eyes. "They don't go for chicken feed around here. They go for bigger things, Mr. Marshall. And"—he rubbed his chin again—"I reckon you might as well know it now as to wait to hear it from somebody else. Your mother's brother was killed here because of it. The men who killed this man are the men who have killed others. As I warned you in Los Chinos, you inherited blood up there." He pointed to the old mission in the distance. "Blood and a mystery so deep, so dark and hopeless no man has solved it. I doubt that any man ever will."

"Now look here, damn it!" Buck Marshall's patience was at an end. He caught the old man by the collar, shaking him roughly. "I've heard enough of this business. Ever since I got off the stage, you've been hinting and gagging about murder and mystery. I—"

"Mr. Marshall," Ranger's voice croaked, "take your hand out of my collar. There's the muzzle of a .45 in your belly. I don't want to let the hammer fall and kill you."

Marshall stepped back, surprised, amazed. He had barely felt the old man's hand move, but there it was, a long black .45 Colt cradled in it, the muzzle of the weapon staring, the hammer at full cock.

"I never like to draw on a man," Ranger said softly, "but I'm too old to be shook about by a strong young rooster like you. Forgive me, Mr. Marshall. I really mean no harm." The hand slipped the Colt back in its holster, then came forward to reach for Marshall's hand. "Will you shake? Old men like me get nervous. It's the country. In a month or two you'll be the same way—all jumpy and ready to strike like a blind rattler shedding his skin under a bush. I'm sorry."

"Forget it!" Marshall took the outstretched hand, gripping it. "I can shake with any man who has such a slick draw. I didn't believe you had it in you."

"Now you're beginning to make me like you." Ranger's false teeth shone in a grin. "Most young bucks don't respect age. I see you do, and I'm going to tell you everything I can about Sierras de Cielo. That's one of your own Boxed Clover horses lying there dead. The dead man is one of your best riders! Joe Handly's his name. But there's no use standing here. We'll throw the body in the buckboard behind your trunk and pile in the saddle and bridle of the dead horse. We can talk as we ride, Mr. Marshall."

AND that's the way we do it," explained the lawyer after they had placed the dead man and his saddle in the buckboard and were again rolling along in the heat. "No fuss, no bother. You find a dead man, pick him up, take him home and bury him. I'll take the report back to Los Chinos this afternoon. I'll tell Nix Wyatt, the sheriff, just what happened."

"But," objected Marshall, "aren't we supposed to call a coroner before removing a body or disturbing the scene?"

"Ordinarily, yes," nodded Ranger. "That is, in any other part of the country. Here we don't bother so much. Along with that"—he fixed

his piercing eyes on Marshall's face for an instant—"I'm the coroner of this district. At the present, I'm also your lawyer. You have no need to worry about anything, unless it's to be very careful to mind your own business no matter what you might get to thinking down here. Death too often strikes those who meddle."

"I'm beginning to understand that," agreed Marshall, "but you were going to tell me something—"

"Oh, yes!" cut in Ranger. "So I was. Forgive me, son." He placed a bony fish tail of a hand on Marshall's knee. "Old men wander. You may not believe it, but I'm eighty-seven years old this coming fall." He sucked his breath through his teeth with a sharp hiss, then sighed wearily. "But to get along with my little tale: Men are killed here. Ghosts walk at Rancho del Diablo. It's a mystery." His voice dropped to a whisper. "A vast, vast mystery—and death. Don't tell any one." He turned his old head quickly and again fixed those blue-steel eyes on Marshall's face. "Don't tell any one I told you. That's all. I hope you will be good enough to keep the secret. That's all . . . all I can tell you."

"But I heard that much even before I got to Los Chinos," Marshall said sharply. "You've told me the same thing a dozen times!"

"And the thirteenth might be the charm." Ranger glanced around furtively as if expecting something to come leaping upon them from the brush or hot wind. "Just keep the secret."

"Damn it," Marshall's patience was snapping again, "you talk like a man who's cracked in the head! Hell fire, you're not telling me anything—"

"Like a man cracked in the head!" interrupted the lawyer. "Well, now, that's something!" A dry, rolling cackle of laughter came from the wrinkled lips. "That's good! But look here, my fine young friend"—he turned quickly to face Marshall—"take a good look at me. Watch how a man acts with a cracked head. In a month you'll have one yourself."

He threw back his head and laughed. But it was not like laughter. It was like a wild splattering, tumbling and tossing sound of a crackling fire in dry brush.

CHAPTER II

THE RANCHO

IT was a few minutes before noon when Deeth Ranger pulled the sweat-lathered mustangs to a halt. "It's rather an impressive sight, isn't it?" he asked, watching Marshall's reaction.

Giant oaks were around them, their great roots clutched in the smooth white sand, the interwinding limbs and heavy foliage casting a dense shadow on the ground. Straight in front of the horses was the mission, a masterpiece of ancient art, each pane of its windows a gem of some far-off land, brought across the seas in crude sailing ships to be transported overland on the backs of Indians. The old walls were more than two feet thick, made of adobe and stone, with wide black beams as hard as iron above the brass-bound doors and windows. A mass of high towers stretched skyward from the center of the enormous roof, their dark slits of windows glaring down like air holes in a dungeon wall.

"The newer buildings are there," explained Ranger, pointing his whip to the left. "Some are very old themselves."

Marshall saw them. They were low adobes, some mere huts. Beyond them were long, winding lines of corrals of walled stones and mud, innumerable big sheds flanking them.

"That's the main bunkhouse." Again the whip pointed, this time to a long, low building, and then to another with bright strings of red and green peppers hanging from the sides of the doors and windows. "And that's the kitchen and dining room. The men must be at dinner now. Your first question"—Ranger glanced at his old-fashioned watch —"will be 'What is it?' "

It came then, before Marshall could speak. It was faint, sounding far away, just a splatter of sound, the tinkling of a harsh-toned bell, raw as a biting blade to one's nerves. Then it died away, and a rolling, rippling, exploding burst of laughter followed, a shudder of sound bursting forth from somewhere inside the old mission as if a dozen asses were suddenly braying.

"What is it?" demanded Marshall as the sounds ended.

"Wait!" Ranger held up his hand. "You'll see."

The *tinkle, tinkle-tinkle* of the bell came again. Following it, getting closer, came another explosive outburst of the nerve-scraping laughter. Suddenly the two wide old oak doors of the mission swung open. A man appeared, coming into the light as a ghost might have emerged from the doorway of a dark, cool tomb.

He was dressed in the faded costume of some Spanish knight of old, wearing his heavy, gray-tinged blond hair in a long hood. A pair of blue eyes stared out of the sunken sockets of a skeletonlike face. Above the eyes was a scar, a deep pit in the forehead over which the pale skin had drawn, healed and dried as if covering a gash in the skull that had been made by the deep-drawn blade of a hatchet. With a talon hand gripping the doors, the man sent forth another burst of that hellish laughter, his mad eyes staring at the buckboard.

"*Haw-haw-ha-a-a-a-ah!*" The laughter came to an end with an explosive ring. "And now another comes! Always another, and then another! Down through the centuries it has been, the greed and lust of men driving them—the terrible ache in their vitals, the gleam of want in their eye!" The eerie laughter soared up again, and the madman came forward slowly, his hands lifted, head thrown back, a fanatical gleam in the bright blue eyes. "And all they come here for is death—*death!*"

"DON JUAN!" Deeth Ranger's voice lashed out at the old man like a biting whip. "*Don Juan Sebastian!* Come to yourself! Can't you see a guest stands before your door?"

"A guest?" The voice was gentle. The madman's face changed. He stopped, cringed, and stared emptily at the ground for a moment. "A guest? I am honored with a guest?"

"Yes, a guest!" Ranger's bitter croak was like another blow from a whip. "Where are your manners?"

"A thousand pardons," apologized the man, speaking now in perfect Spanish and looking up humbly. "A million pardons! All my servants are at your command. My house is your house, your word is my law. Alight, sir. Alight!"

"Crazier than hell," whispered Ranger from the side of his mouth. "Oldest man here. Inside his crippled brain lies the key to all the

mystery of Sierras de Cielo."

"The key?" Don Juan looked up suddenly, the wild stare coming back to his eyes. "*The key!* Do you want it?" His voice rose to a scream. "Of course! They all come for it, they fight for it, die for it." Again the voice dropped, a ray of sunlight breaking straight down through the trees and playing about the horrible dent in the white forehead. "They look until they're blind. They kill their best friends. The key!" He cackled a low splatter of sound. "A scrap of paper, a strange disk, a coin, a sign, a mysterious symbol! Ah, they're like simple-minded old men playing with children."

He turned, all interest in the buckboard and its occupants suddenly deserting him. He started back for the door. A sound halted him, something very faint. He stood there looking upward.

Then Marshall saw that other men had come out of the dining room and kitchen—a dozen evil-looking individuals, each with his middle encircled by a heavy cartridge belt, and a six-shooter at either hip. Some of them were still chewing their food slowly and noiselessly, some standing with their mouths open. Every pair of eyes remained fixed on the old man, and each pair seemed to burn with curious intensity while cocked ears waited for him to speak again.

The faint noise Marshall had heard came again. It was something stirring to life up there in the towers of the old mission. Then, as if the ground shook, as if the gnarled oaks became musical instruments, the mournful tunes of ancient mission bells started to ring. The sounds became thunder in the sky, sweet, far-reaching and clear, sounds that must have made their way down the dangerous slopes of the mountains and miles out across the great valley to northward.

"Twelve o'clock," muttered Ranger. "Sun time. Juan keeps the bells up to the minute."

"And what's that!" cried Marshall, cowering back in the seat as a monstrous shape suddenly flung downward through the shadows from one of the high towers, letting out a fierce squeak that might have come from some gigantic rat as it wheel and fled away to lose itself almost instantly in the foliage of the trees.

"A bat." Ranger's voice was a croak intended for a laugh. "The South American vampire kind. They always give me a jolt. No one knows how they got to this country."

"But—"

"Oh, don't let them worry you!" Ranger waved his hands. "Maybe the mystery brought them, or maybe the blame should be laid to the ghosts. Personally, I suspect that the padres brought them along or some of the Indians." His voice lowered significantly. "Some people swear they're not bats at all. They say they're ghosts of the long-buried dead. I wouldn't know, never having had much to do with spirits and their ilk. Well, hadn't we better get our dead man out of the rig, and then get something to eat? I'm hungry, and I'm not scared—because I know I'm going to leave this cursed place right after dinner."

FOUR men came forward to take charge of the body and carry it down to a small shed near the bunkhouse. Two men took Marshall's big trunk on inside the old mission, and another carried his heavy bags. Deeth Ranger intro-

duced Marshall to the crew. He left the largest and apparently the most important of the lot to the last.

"And, reluctantly, Mr. Marshall," he finally muttered, "I introduce Jules Jule, an odd name, but it's the only one he's ever given us. He's supposed to be the cow boss of the Boxed Clover. He wears mighty good clothes for an ordinary cow boss, if my opinion might accidentally mean anything to you."

Jules Jule came forward with a scowl. He was over six feet, all brawn and as wide-chested as a bull, a strikingly handsome man in a brash manner. His eyes were as black as tar, a shining contrast to the short, reddish beard covering his face. A great white hat sat on the back of his head. His shirt was of glittering red-and-green checks. Silver ornaments gleamed from his leather vest and his bull-hide chaps, and long, silver spurs were at his heels.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Marshall." Jule thrust out a big, widespread hand. "The old crow"—he jerked his head toward Ranger—"doesn't get along very well with me—nor anybody else I've ever been able to think of in the two years I've been riding for the Boxed Clover."

"Maybe he's just hungry," grinned Marshall, taking the big hand that gripped his with the strength of a giant. "Let's not start off by quarreling." He glanced at Ranger. "There seems to be other things to do here."

"Plenty, yes." Ranger's voice came again, low, irritating and no longer a croak. It reminded Marshall now of some dangerous animal beginning to growl. "But you might as well know that I don't like Jules Jule any more than Jules Jule does not like me. I wouldn't trust him near a blow hole in hell!"

"The feeling is mutual." Jule cast a wicked glance at the old man, his hand still gripping Marshall's. "Some day"—the dark eyes suddenly narrowed into fierce streaks—"he'll say too damned much with that puckered mouth, and I'll lose myself and stave about six lead holes in his belly."

"Holes in my belly, you mink-eyed whelp!" Ranger's voice lifted into a wild croak that might have been the attempted scream of some giant bird of prey. "You lie! You know I only wait the opportunity of seeing you pluck up enough courage to reach for one of those pretty-handled guns at your hips. You know I ache to kill you! You know I . . . I—"

A wild splatter of laughter, intermingled with the tinkling of a bell, cut him off. Don Juan Sebastian had come up, unchanged except for a ragged red handkerchief bound tightly around his head, and his hair now tied into a knot at the back of his neck.

Marshall saw Deeth Ranger catch the first blow in the pit of the stomach. Don Juan had struck him a back-handed swipe. Ranger doubled forward, both hands gripping his flat stomach, and then he was leaping out of the way, his face twisted with pain and rage.

"You lie, lie!" screeched the don. "Both of you lie! All your talk is mockery! Hide your faces, dogs!"

He darted on to Jules Jule. Marshall saw the old man's knotty fist fly out. Jules Jule might have grasped it, but he did not try. He stepped backward, but the fist was after him, striking him in the mouth. Jules whirled, rasped out an oath, and leaped farther out of the way.

"Stop it!" Marshall leaped forward, seized the old don from behind and pinned his arms to his sides.

"Don't hurt 'im!" bawled Jules Jule. "Go easy! He . . . he's an old man."

"And crazy!" Deeth Ranger added, his voice ringing with alarm.

"I'm not hurting him!" Marshall had swung the don to one side, throwing one leg around his kicking feet, making it impossible for the old man to move. "Damn it, I'm not here to injure him."

"And that was good of you," commented Deeth Ranger a minute later when men had come forward to seize the don and carry the kicking and snarling figure away. "You respect age, as I said this morning. Don Juan's old, very old."

"But not as old as you are, at that," remarked Marshall, a dry smile twisting across his face. He was beginning to understand that there was something here that kept Don Juan Sebastian from harm among these ruffians, something that would have brought death to any other man regardless of his age.

Ranger and Jule must have both realized that Marshall had suspected something. The quarreling had come to an end between them, and soon they were moving on into the huge old dining room where a long table littered with plates and still steaming food almost filled the room.

JULES JULE'S place was at the head of the table. He offered to change in favor of the new owner of the ranch, but Marshall waved the suggestion aside, and soon most of the crowd was seated and a big, pock-pitted Mexican brought in more and more food until the table looked ready to groan with it.

"You'll find everything in tiptop shape, Mr. Marshall." Jules Jule seemed eager to talk, and Marshall noticed that he seemed to have forgotten his feud with the crabby old Deeth Ranger. "Our records are kept in the mission, in what once started out to be one of those old-time Bibles the padres used to make by hand. You have big herds, good cattle and horses, and—I'm glad to say—there's been no hint of rustling since I took over."

"Which is no news worth recording," snapped Ranger, glancing up from his plate. "The Boxed Clover has suffered no rustling on this range in years. The fact is, rustling in this district looks like a thing of the past."

"I wasn't talking to you, you damned old buzzard!" exploded Jule, big hands suddenly gripping the edge of the table, black eyes glittering at Ranger. "Keep your damned lawyer mouth out of my talk!"

"Don't curse at me!" Deeth Ranger looked as if he were about to bolt out of his chair and make a charge upon Jules Jule by a wild dash up the table. "I won't stand for that!"

"I say what I think!" Jules Jule snarled back at him. "If you don't like it, you can go to hell! I still say you're a damned old buzzard. I still—"

"Now wait!" Marshall was suddenly on his feet, planting his hands flat on the table. "This is the second time I've told you two to cut it out. I'm tired of it. As long as I'm supposed to own this ranch, every man among you will take orders!"

"I'm not one of your hired hands!" snapped Ranger, sucking in his teeth. "I'm your lawyer, Mar-

shall, and as your lawyer you'll treat me—"

"And be sure to pass along the usual fee!" cut in Jule with a sneer. "We know all about that business, buzzard face."

"I told you to shut up!" Marshall thundered. His clenched fist lifted as he glowered at the big foreman. "And that goes for you, too, lawyer or no lawyer!" His eyes, now hot with anger, sent a withering glare down the table to Ranger. "You're not—"

A wild, half-muffled wail cut him short. A cry had come from the mission. It was strangely animal-like, a sound that did not seem to come from any human.

Every man at the table came to his feet with a bound. Boots thumped. Spurred heels clanged. In a stampeding rush every man was heading for the door, but even above the rush of feet, the ring of spurs, the kicking back of chairs and excited cries, Marshall heard the *tinkle, tinkle-tinkle* of Don Juan's hellish little bell, and following it came the man's horrible laughter.

CHAPTER III

KNIFED!

BUCK MARSHALL was the first to reach the great doors. For some reason, once the men were out of the old dining room, they lost their first frantic curiosity. Marshall did not notice it at first. He did not notice that the crowd seemed to cringe back behind him as he caught the great stubs of hand-wrought brass and shoved them upward to lift the powerful bars on the inner sides of the doors. As he flung the doors open and stepped into the mission, the crowd behind him seemed to cringe, as if expecting something terrifying to come rushing out of the shadows to meet them.

Light poured in from the windows in diffused colors. The great room immediately struck one with its splendor. Massive beams carved and hewn from the entire trunks of giant oaks were high overhead. The dark-paneled walls were forty feet high.

To the right and at the end of the room the great altar was like a huge stage flanked by giant angels chiseled and polished from glass quartz of a thousand hues. Underfoot, the floor was a masterpiece of stone-cutting, setting, and carving. Heavy oak benches, constructed ages before, were standing there covered with the dust of the years.

"On . . . on the altar," somebody behind Marshall whispered. "That . . . that's where things sometimes happen."

"May the spirits have mercy on us," another cried. "I wish I'd never seen this place!"

Marshall strode on, conscious of a nervous chill playing along his back as he made his way up the aisle between the benches. Now he was aware of the crowd still hanging back, with men standing wide-legged, their hands gripping the butts of their guns. Suddenly Marshall halted as if slapped to a stop by a blow. A hellish sound was filling the place.

It was Don Juan's devilish little bell again, but the ringing, nerve-racking sound was multiplied a dozen times, the dark panels appearing to take it up, echoing it in weird waves back and forth across the room, then tossing it upward for the carved beams to send it reeling and swelling down to the stones of the floor. No spontaneous outburst of that eerie laughter followed, but something else came instead.

Marshall heard a sharp *eee-eek!* It came from a dark, spiraling opening in the ceiling that loomed like a yawned dank cave's mouth above the altar and seemed to stretch on and on to the old towers on the roof. Then came the swishing of beating wings.

"They smell blood," whispered a fear-stricken voice from behind Marshall. "Gawd, they're comin' down."

Marshall saw them then. They were bats, those huge South American vampires with the reputation of having an insatiable lust for human blood. There were four of them. Their furry wings seemed to fill the darkness of the altar, their sharp, violent cries making the air ring.

"Better get away from there, new boss!" bawled a man, his voice filling the room with a ring of terror. "I wouldn't trust 'em not to jump yuh, big as they are! Some say they've done it in the past. An' there's more of 'em up there. *Look!* They're all comin' down! I tell yuh, they smell human blood!"

Marshall approached the altar, disregarding the warning. Beating wings tore at him. Wicked little eyes flashed in front of him, as bright-gleaming as black diamonds in the hazy light, the horrible heads and glinting long fangs a terrifying spectacle. Marshall struck out at them, beating the air with both arms. A cloud of wings swooped toward him as if to suffocate him, each wing a velvet shadow. A strange, musty smell began to fill the air.

THEN hell broke loose behind Marshall. That terrible little bell of Don Juan's was ringing, the whipping sounds filling the room. At Marshall's back the wild spasms of laughter broke. Don Juan had come, and now his voice rose in a shrill screech.

"Back! All of you!" he cried, pushing on up beside Marshall, the bell ringing, whipping, and shaking like mad. "From the long, long dead you are, and back to the long, long dead you will go!"

Then the old don plunged into an incoherent chattering of sounds. Whether they belonged to any primitive language or not, Marshall could not tell. Some of the sounds seemed to be imitating those fierce little cries of the bats as if the man were actually talking to them in their own language. Then, from somewhere about his person, Don Juan produced an ancient torch. He struck a match and a burst of flame leaped into being on the end of the torch. The great bats set up another fierce *ee-eek! ee-eek-ing.* But suddenly the air was clearing, the velvet swish of wings reluctantly beating upward, their angry owners still crying their disappointment.

"He's whipped 'em back!" gasped a man near the door. "Just like he allus does. I'll swear that the crazy fool can talk their own kind o' talk! He . . . he's one of 'em—a vampire in human shape!"

"It's the torch an' that bell what done it!" put in another voice. "The torch an' that bell! That bell's enough to run anything out of its skin, an' they can't stand the light. They're devils of the dark. Light blinds 'em."

Breathless silence simply drowned out the man. Don Juan was moving on beside Marshall, the torch sputtering, the light flickering and the flames blowing as if unseen spirits were fanning them. Don Juan put out his left hand, halting Marshall. Then the old man's voice lifted, at first in a whisper, then a shout.

"Sacred Mother, it is done! *Another!*"

Marshall stared. In front of them, sprawled flat on his stomach with his hands gripped to his chest, lay the body of a man with the pooling blood around him showing dark and shining in the flickering glow of the torchlight.

"Greed!" Don Juan was raving again. "The immortal scheming of man! Oh, Eye of Heaven, beautiful jewel whose splendor is blinding to mortal man, they search, they ever search for you! To feel you, to touch you, to stagger away with you like thieves in the night! And death is the only answer you give them for all their pains and plans!"

"Ee-eek! Ee-eek! Ee-eek!"

The sounds were like echoes, like an outburst of fiendish applause soaring down from the yawning maw of the great cavity behind the altar. It sent a thousand icy needles prickling up and down Marshall's back as he suddenly seized the torch and bent over the dead man.

"COME on up here, the rest of you!" Even as Marshall flung his voice over his shoulder he was beset with a feeling that hideous goblins were watching him and mocking him from the fleeing *and wiggling shadows ever dancing* about the great room from the sputtering old torch. "You haven't lost all your sand, have you?"

"It doesn't take long to lose anything here," admitted Jules Jule when he came up, right hand still gripping the butt of one of his guns, his black eyes large and luminous as he kept staring around him. "This is one place I rarely ever set my foot in. Never until I have to come in, to enter things in that book, and then I bring plenty of light and a bodyguard. There's been too much happening in here!"

"For once you speak the truth," Deeth Ranger declared. "First this is a church, a holy sanctuary, and then the padres are gone, the winds and the ghost of the evil taking their place to mock the winged angels the old hands carved so devoutly and with such unerring skill. What have we there, my good client, Mr. Marshall?"

"A dead man!" Marshall stood up, his voice jerky, every nerve tensed to the breaking point, every muscle in his body violently trembling. "Murder here seems to be the dessert for all the meals. Do you know him?"

Jules Jule and another man had mustered up enough courage to turn the body over on its back. It lay in front of a great desk made of solid timbering fastened to the wall behind the rostrum. On the desk was a huge book, a yard long and thirty inches wide, a book over eighteen inches thick and bound in the heaviest of cowhide that had been hand-tooled and heavily and elaborately ornamented with brass, copper, and semiprecious stones from somewhere. A powerful brass chain held it to the wall.

"Never saw this big, dark fellow before!" Jules Jule's voice was *nervous. "How about the rest of* you boys?" He glanced at the men around him. "Take a good look at him and speak up!"

"Don't know 'im," they all agreed. "Not unless," added a little, dry-faced and sharp-featured man called Pinky Shaw, "he's the one-eyed duck who was playin' the fiddle down in Whiskey Pete's last Saturday night."

"I . . . I believe it is him!" exclaimed Jules Jule, bending forward. "Yes, it is! Of course it's the

"This is not the first murder you will encounter, Mr. Marshall," Ranger stated flatly. "You inherited blood up here!"

very fellow! But nobody down there knew his name."

"Who's Whiskey Pete?" demanded Marshall. "Where does he come in on all this cockeyed business?"

"Runs a dive down on the river," explained Jules Jule. "Your uncle Oklahoma George tried to drive him out, but couldn't do it. Whiskey Pete showed him a thing or two. George Lee thought he owned all the land up and down the river, from Los Chinos to Black Mesa, from the water's edge to thirty miles straight east. Whiskey Pete beat him out on an old Spanish land grant. He owns five acres about five miles down there"—he pointed toward the southwest—"and the law couldn't stir him out."

"And what's this Whiskey Pete doing down there?" Marshall was studying the cow boss' face intently. "How could he play any part here, and what's his dive like, Jule?"

"The usual border dump!" Jules Jule said cynically. "That answers

the last question. What he has to do with our mystery and troubles here, well, I don't know. Maybe nothing. But he's got the worst mobs, the dirtiest killers on the river. As a matter of fact, the dive's the best place on all the border to get killed—barring Rancho del Diablo. Whiskey himself—"

"That'll wait," cut in Marshall as he swung back to the body. "Let's see what happened to this man. He's the real point of interest just now."

The light was held closer. Marshall ripped aside the blood-soaked shirt and saw a jagged three-cornered hole driven into the dead man's heart as if he had been pierced with some medieval broadsword. The stroke must have killed him almost instantly.

"Death came to this man just as it came to Oklahoma George Lee," Deeth Ranger murmured. "And we never knew why, how it was done, or anything else. Here he lay—dead!"

"But . . . but I thought he was shot!" exclaimed Marshall, stumbling to his feet. "I thought you—"

"You don't stop long enough to *think* here," cut in Ranger, his voice going back to a croak. "George Lee died here in front of that infernal book, as I say he did. Many men have died in this room."

"But that big old book did not kill them!" Marshall said unbelievingly.

"That book is a curse!" Ranger's voice was itself like a curse in the great room. "You'll find that out before you're much older. The whole place is a curse on the face of creation. That's why it was sold in the first place. The church washed its hands of it, branded it as a place of the damned. I—"

SAY, there's somethin' happened!" A lean, hawk-nosed cowboy had come stumbling up to them. Marshall had noticed that he left the mission at the first opportunity. Now he was back, white-faced and trembling.

"Joe Handly's body is gone," he gasped. "Gone right off that old table in the little bunkhouse! There's nary sign of 'im left!"

"Gone!" Don Juan's voice rose into a shriek of laughter as he gave his little bell a vicious ring. "Gone as they all go! Gone to join the rest of the dead! Maybe into the Well of a Thousand Years! Ah, the Well, the Well—the hole without a bottom!"

"What in hell are you talking about?" Marshall caught him by the arm. "What—"

"Don't do that, Marshall!" Deeth Ranger's voice was as shrill and fierce as an eagle's scream as he jumped forward to push Marshall back. "Damn it, man, never stop him when . . . when he starts!"

"Why?" Marshall asked mildly, but his eyes sharpened with curiosity.

"Well . . . well, he might say something!" the old lawyer said. He seemed uncomfortable. "But let's get out of here—down to that bunkhouse. Let . . . let's see what's happened. Come on, Jules."

To Marshall's surprise he saw the old man grip the big foreman's arm, and there was no hint of the enmity they had exhibited toward each other before. Then Don Juan's voice came again, as paralyzing to all movement as an electric shock.

"Deep, deep, deep, it goes," the man was muttering. "Down and down, forever down, the skeletons leering on the ledges, vacant sockets staring into the blackness of the eternal depths. Down, far down,

where the light of God's sun never penetrates the gloom. Far, far down to everlasting oblivion. May the Eye of Heaven have mercy on their souls!"

"Go on," whispered Marshall, his attention riveted on the old man. "Go on, Don Juan."

"Don't do that, I tell you!" screeched Deeth Ranger. Raging, he pulled off his old hat and threw it on the floor. "Hell fire, man, haven't you got a single lick of sense! Didn't I tell you never to stop the damned old fool when he starts to talk? Never, never stop him, no matter how crazy the talk might sound to you!"

CHAPTER IV

A BODY VANISHES

THEY covered the body with an old wagon sheet, and left the dead man in the mission. After the disappearance of Joe Handly's body, Marshall was somewhat reluctant to leave this corpse unwatched, but every man in the crew refused outright to act as guard. Marshall stood hesitating in the doorway until Jules Jule and Deeth Ranger caught his arm impatiently, urging him to hurry. Don Juan was the last to leave the mission, carefully putting out his torch by slipping its ancient metal cap over the wick and smothering the blaze.

But when they reached the bunkhouse it told them nothing. In reality the building was one of the oldest on the ranch. Like many of the others it had been erected for sleeping quarters either for guests visiting the mission or for some family of Indians who had lived there as servants.

It was well constructed and durable, in its own way as much a work of art as the mission. The same perfect masonry of flat stones covered the floor. The walls were immensely thick, the windows in the sides and ends of the room mere slits that looked like ports from which besieged men might fight in case of an uprising in a land where hostile tribes of Indians were always roaming. In the northwest corner was an old Spanish fireplace, and dark oak paneled the walls against the thick stone and mud as if to keep out the cold in winter.

"Gone like a puff of tobacco smoke in the wind!" exclaimed Ranger as he thrust open the groaning old plank door and looked around the interior. "How do you like your place by this time, Mr. Marshall?"

"For excitement, I guess you couldn't beat it!" admitted Marshall. "About what time can we expect the next murder? Do you ever eat a meal in peace?"

"That's up to the mission itself!" put in Jules Jule with a thin smile just showing through his beard. "We may have one in the next few minutes. Then again another may not come for a week, a month—three months. That's the beauty of living here, Mr. Marshall. You never know what to expect, but you can keep yourself in trim by expecting—and knowing—that the worst will come, that all you have to do is wait for it if it's a little slow in coming. It'll never disappoint you."

"And you've said you know nothing about the murder of Handly?" Marshall was watching the foreman closely. "You don't have a single idea why it was done, or who could have gained by it?"

Jule shrugged. "You and Deeth Ranger know more about it than I do. You two found the body on

the trail. You saw how it was lying, the circumstances surrounding it—"

"Only there was nothing surrounding it!" Marshall cut in brusquely. He had a feeling that half the men in this crowd were laughing inwardly at him and deliberately trying to make things tough for him. "Who was his best friend in the crowd? Surely some of you men have a best friend?" he said half sarcastically.

"Only we don't have." Again that hint of a wise smirk rippled across Jule's face. "No man here trusts any other. It doesn't pay. As soon as a man starts trusting—well, he usually winds up shot in the bushes or stabbed in the old mission or found with his throat cut from ear to ear down the trail between here and Whiskey Pete's dive. Catch the point?"

"I do!" Marshall nodded grimly, trying to read some message to the riddle in the staring eyes. "All I have to say is—if you men live here under those conditions, it's a hell of a ranch!"

"It's a *damned* ranch!" corrected Jules Jule ironically. "It's damned by God, the ghosts, the bats, and man himself. That's why it's called the Ranch of the Devil."

"To take the curse off your hands," Deeth Ranger said a little too eagerly, "I'll give you forty thousand dollars for it, cash on the barrel head, Mr. Marshall."

"That's very nice of you." Marshall tried to make his smile look genuine. "I couldn't think of it, however. It would keep me awake nights thinking of the injustice I had done you."

"Oh, I'd get my money back—in time!" Ranger assured him. "I'd peddle the place off to some fool tenderfoot in Chicago or New York."

"And then buy it back for a song," Marshall retorted, "after the mystery ran them out! Lawyers always know how to keep their hand out and their eye peeled for an opportunity, don't they, Mr. Ranger? No, thanks! I'll keep the Boxed Clover. I'm beginning to like the place.

"But right now"—he squared his shoulders, observing that both Jules Jule and Deeth Ranger seemed to be rather disgruntled—"let's try to find the body of the man we left here. Ghosts don't carry off the dead, you know, and the big bats couldn't get in here. And speaking of those damn things, why hasn't somebody killed them off long before this?"

"Because," the lawyer told him, "you just don't kill them off. Men have done it in the past. They don't any more. It's a curse to kill or hurt a bat. No man who has ever shot one of them has lived longer than twenty-four hours afterward. You'll find it written in Spanish in that big old book in the mission that, 'He who kills a vampire shall die.' The book never lies, Mr. Marshall. Don't take it lightly. I mean that. I mean every word of it. Things happen here!"

"So I have observed," Marshall acknowledged quietly, his unspoken thoughts seething. "But we started out by talking about one Joe Handly, found shot to death this morning beside a Boxed Clover horse in the trail. I think there's still something more to be said about that. A man found murdered isn't forgotten in fifteen minutes, like a rabbit shot in the sagebrush."

"Maybe Jules Jule can tell you something more," the lawyer suggested meaningly.

"Not a thing." Jule shook back his shoulders, coming to life as if

with some small start that had roused him from morose thoughts. "If Handly had any friends, you might find them down at Whiskey Pete's. He hung out down there a lot of late. I'm willing to ride down there with you this afternoon or tonight, Mr. Marshall. However" —the black eyes narrowed—"I'd advise—just for appearance's sake —that a cracking good pair of .45s under your coat would be in keeping with the order of the day or evening, considering the crowd you'll meet. You can handle a six-shooter, I suppose?"

"Well," Marshall said hesitantly. If these hombres could try to make a fool of him, maybe he could do some leg-pulling, too. "I might hit the side of the mission from this distance if the light was extra good and I was given plenty of time to sight my gun. You see, we're not very handy with firearms in Montana."

"Hm-m-m!" Jule gave him another of those thin smiles. "I've spent some time in Montana." His upper lip curled. "The people I saw up there were poor shots, very poor. I'd say exceptionally poor! I might say even stingy, Mr. Marshall. They waste very few bullets. I've seen spindle-shanked girls knock over a running jackrabbit at forty yards with a single, offhanded throw of a .45, and most of the men I knew up there dropped quail on the fly!"

"But . . . but," stammered Ranger, "that's good shooting in any man's country, Jule! You're not just plain lying, are you?"

"Oh, no!" Jules Jule shook back his shoulders and laughed. "Mr. Marshall will vouch for what I say. Why, I'd no more lie to Mr. Marshall than Mr. Marshall would lie to me, Ranger."

MARSHALL was absolutely certain that the great doors of the mission had been left wide open when they left the place sometime before. But something had closed them, he saw now. He thought of the wind, and realized it would have taken a gale to move those heavy doors. But there they stood, the iron latches in place and fastened solidly enough to withstand the pounding blows of a battering-ram.

Don Juan was still with them. For some reason he was keeping at Marshall's heels like an old dog attaching itself to a new master. At the door he picked up the torch he had left leaning against the wall. He lighted it, handed it to Marshall, and again dropped behind him like a shaggy dog. There was little need of the torch now, but Marshall took it anyway.

The sun had moved on from the center of the heavens. A strong light was finding its way in through the tall windows in the western end of the room, the rays pouring into the room and spilling over the altar in a dazzling color spectacle.

Suddenly Marshall came to an abrupt halt, lifting the torch well above his head. As he had come through the doorway he thought he heard a soft rustling sound, something that reminded them of the velvetlike wings of the huge vampires. Now he was looking at the bare floor where the body of a man had been left sprawling in a wide pool of his gore. The floor was clean, only a spot of faint dampness left where the pool of blood had been.

"It's gone!" he gasped. "Even . . . even the blood is gone with it."

"That's easy," croaked Deeth Ranger without surprise. "The hellish vampires have been at work

again. They sucked the blood up like a sponge—every drop of it! Didn't I tell you they lived on it? To them human blood is like morphine to a suffering addict dying for—"

"Hush!" hissed Jule, his face ghastly. "What—*what's that!*"

They listened—and heard the sounds of spilling water were coming from somewhere beyond the altar. They seemed to rise from beneath it, echoing whispers and chuckles stealing up and spreading like the guarded voices of thieves plotting in the old walls. Into it all crept the slow grating and grinding of turning wheels. Suddenly Marshall found himself flinching as if from a blow.

Another noise was coming. The old altar was beginning to speak, to tremble, to vibrate. The ceiling took it up, the sounds running along the old beams, every hand-carved panel beginning to hum. The mission shook. There was no doubt about it. The whole structure trembled. Men screamed with terror. Flying feet started racing down the altar steps, down the stone floor, on in a wild scramble to the door and out.

Marshall was left alone in the place. He stood there, transfixed, the sounds boiling around him, deeply, mournfully. Dusty trumpets were blowing in the ceiling. Notes and bars were fluttering down like birds on the wing. The old mission was coming back to life, the long-dead arising and shaking itself out of its sleep.

It was music, so tremendous in volume it was like a storm of wondrous voices beginning to sing a chorus that was turning into the thunder of a multitude of blaring bands. It was enough to daze a man. Not until he had turned and walked to the left did Marshall understand the meaning of it, and then he saw Don Juan Sebastian.

The don sat on an old blackwood bench in the musty deeply shadowed corner. In front of him was the keyboard of an ancient pipe organ. His hands were like talons, like spreading wings beating, skipping, clutching, pausing here, leaping there, music appearing to pour out through the gnarled fingers to go leaping upward, outward, and spreading everywhere.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN IN THE CLOSET

MARSHALL stood there staring, first at the hunched figure of the old man over the keyboard, then around the great room, and then at the huge, half-finished old Bible. Here in this room, just a short while ago, a man had died. From the position of the body, death must have struck him right in front of the rostrum on which the Bible lay. Suddenly Marshall was moving toward it. Then Don Juan's voice came, hardly audible through the weird music.

"Careful, careful, señor! Approach it from the end. The great knife shoots from the front. A step on the middle stone sends it thrusting out, and whoever is in front of it dies. It is a very dangerous knife."

"A knife?" Marshall halted, scowling. "It's a damn fine time to tell a man about it. What's it doing there? Why hasn't somebody with a pinch of sense torn it out?"

He moved on to the end of the desk. The huge tome was lying there. Marshall lifted the cover with difficulty; it must have weighed twenty pounds. The huge metal medallion in the center of it was like

lead. He studied it for a moment, and then looked at the writing inside the first page. It was in Spanish, the lettering a work of art. Slowly, since he had to study each word to translate it into English, he read:

TO
BEAREBEE—WHOSE PORTALS
ALL THE MYSTERY REVEALS

"So much for that," he growled, turning another page.

Here was true art! Every page of the beautiful old parchment was a masterpiece. The First Book of the Bible had been completed, every word carefully drawn, shaded and reshaded, the margins elaborated with flying angels.

Then the work came to an abrupt end. The hands that had worked so tediously had halted, the mystery of the halting long gone with the years. And here other hands had taken a part in the book. Here were crude symbols, curls, whirls, signs and hieroglyphic drawings that might have come from some sacred Egyptian tomb.

Farther on came tally sheets, an odd assortment of bookkeeping, the price of beef for one year, the cost of flour, coffee, horseshoes, riding gear, the number of cattle and horses on the range, a log, a chart, a map, the entry of a new baby born to a Mexican cowboy's wife, and the tale of one Mexican shooting another to death over a dog fight!

"What a book!" exclaimed Marshall as the old don came up to stand beside him. "It certainly has traveled a long way from the original holy intention. Where's the knife, Don Juan?"

"Here, señor." Don Juan eased his foot forward to one of the stones in front of the desk. Keeping carefully to the side, he pressed it with his toe. Instantly there was a fierce *clack!* A black, three-edged blade darted out, heart-high, with a force that would have sent it through an oak log. Like a flash it had come, and like a flash it was gone.

"We're going to tear that damned thing out of there!" exploded Marshall. "I'll have nothing around me like that!"

"But we do not disturb anything, señor," smiled the don, seeming quite sane now. "The man who was killed came as a thief. As a thief he died."

"But . . . but who the devil was he?" demanded Marshall. "Where did he come from?"

"Only the gods could tell," smiled the old man. "It is always so. The book holds the mystery. At least men think it does."

A moment later the don was raving again, clanging his little bell and hopping about like a madman. Marshall turned away in disgust. He walked down the room and turned to a doorway off to the right. His trunk and bags had been taken through the front doorway of the mission, and he intended to look around a bit.

HE passed through the doorway and entered another great part of the mission. Back here was where the padres had made their living quarters in immense rooms with arches, porches, and walkways overlooking a sheer cliff to southward.

The furniture at every hand was massive. Marshall walked into a bedroom and saw a great bedstead made of hand-carved logs. Massive chairs stood against the walls where ancient carved panels stretched from the floor to the ceiling. And here were mirrors and rugs, no doubt purchased by his uncle.

Suddenly Marshall halted. He stood looking through an arched doorway, staring at his open trunk and a woman just beyond it who stood there covering him with a small black six-shooter.

"Thieves die quickly around here, madam!" He spoke ironically "And I see you're going through my trunk. If there's anything in it that you could use—"

"Not so loud!" warned the woman. "No one but you know that I am here. I do not want any one else to know. Swear that you won't tell, otherwise I'll shoot you down!"

He stared at her. Now that his first surprise was gone, he realized that she had a classical, breath-taking beauty compounded of long, blue-black hair, flower-white skin, and finely chiseled features. She wore some kind of long, shiny black dress.

"I didn't know," he began, removing his big hat, "that Rancho del Diablo had feminine beauty along with everything else. I—"

"Quiet!" Her hand seemed to tighten on the butt of the gun. "I swear I'll drop you in your tracks if you try to . . . to stop me."

"But what's the idea of going through my trunk and bags?" he demanded. "If there was anything in them—"

"Remember," she cut in, her voice tense with excitement, "say nothing of my being here. In the end it will be to your advantage."

She was backing away. He saw his old six-shooters and heavy cartridge belts lying on the side of a bed and wondered whether the woman intended to take them. But she left them there and backed away from him, moving quietly toward a doorway behind her. There she halted and spoke again.

"Remember, everything may be to your advantage."

She was gone then. Marshall picked up one of the guns and belt and moved to the doorway through which the woman had passed. He intended to get at the bottom of this business or get shot in the attempt.

He stepped into a room that was absolutely bare except for the dark panels on the wall. For a moment he did not see the closed door, the only one in the room. Then he was crossing the room. He caught the doorknob, gave it a twist, and flung the door open with a bang against the wall.

Even as the door came open, he yelled. A dead man fell forward from the interior of a narrow closet.

"NOW who in hell is he?" Marshall was asking that question a few minutes later as men came boiling into the room. Not yet had he mentioned the woman. He could see no point in telling this villainous crowd about her. "He's been dead for hours. He's as stiff as a plank!"

"As to *who* he is, I can't tell you!" Jule growled. "But he's one of Whiskey Pete's crowd. I've seen him down there."

"But how was he killed?" demanded Marshall. "There's not a spot of blood on him anywhere!"

"Rip off his shirt!" ordered Deeth Ranger. "Maybe that will tell us a little something."

It was the body of an enormous man, one who looked larger and stronger even than the bombastic Jules Jule. They tore off his shirt, stripping it down the back and front to the waistline before Marshall halted them.

"Look!" he exclaimed, excitedly, "this man's been bound and gagged! Somebody's had him tied up to where he couldn't move hand or foot or make a sound!"

"An' look at the little cut in the side of his neck!" cried one of the cowboys, dropping to his knees beside the body. "An' on his arms to boot! Ever' place where there's a vein showin' just under the skin! Somethin' sucked all the blood outta 'im."

"It's those damned bats!" Deeth Ranger gasped. "Somebody fed this man to them as sure as we're born, men. Great Lord, can you imagine such a thing! Marshall, I . . . I'm going home. To hell with Rancho del Diablo. It's a curse on the face of creation and should be burned to the ground."

"Not so fast!" Marshall caught Ranger by the arm and held him. "You're supposed to be my lawyer. You're not leaving with a murder popping up here to stare us in the face every five minutes. Jule, you and a couple of the fellows go saddle some horses. We're taking a ride down to your Whiskey Pete's."

"But what good it'll do is beyond me," complained Jules Jule to Marshall as they rode down the trail with Deeth Ranger and two of the cowboys following them. "Whiskey Pete won't tell you a thing. Probably doesn't know a thing to tell you. But, anyway, you'll have a chance to see his hell hole."

And a hell hole it was! It had that air even from the distance. The houses were low and rambling, perched on a high bank of the Rio with overhanging balconies above the water. Giant old pepper trees grew out of the sandy white ground. In front of the largest building stood ten or twelve saddled horses. Others were at hitch racks along the sides of the buildings, and Marshall saw six heavy freight wagons drawn up back in the brush with a group of villainous-looking men squatting over a small brush fire and broiling some kind of meat.

"What are the wagons for?" Marshall asked curiously, glancing at Jule. "Looks like they're loaded with iron, judging by the ruts the tires have made in the sand."

"Don't know what they're for?" Something told Marshall that the foreman was lying. "Never noticed them around here before."

"But plenty of them have been here before." Marshall pointed to the deep wheel ruts in the trail. "This trail wasn't made in a day, if my eyes tell me anything. Many wagons run here, Jule."

"And lots of other things, yes," admitted the foreman pointedly. "We make it a point at Rancho del Diablo to attend strictly to our own damned business, boss. We've found that it paid well in the long run."

"Not trying to put me in my place, are you?" Marshall asked dangerously.

"I don't play that way, Marshall." Jules Jule's tone was rapidly growing harsher. "I'm merely trying to put you right about matters."

"We don't want to fight, do we?" Marshall looked at him searchingly.

A low laugh twisted the foreman's lips. "Well, I never make it a point to deny a man of his rights—even if he happens to be my boss."

"I'll bear that in mind, Jule."

"Don't let your nerves get you, boss." Jule's tone suddenly changed. "We have trouble with our own. No harm meant." He held up his hand. "I know how you feel. We're all scared here, and any little thing gets us riled up."

THEY pulled up at the hitch rack a minute later. A crowd of men on the front porch eyed them half sullenly. One of the men turned, quickly disappearing inside as if going to report something. Marshall threw his reins across the long log pole of the hitch rack and walked on with a nod to the men on the porch.

Inside, the first man to greet him was Whiskey Pete, whom Marshall recognized without an introduction. He was a one-eyed whale of a man with his black, greasy hair parted in the middle, enormous mustaches upflaring at either side of his wide nostrils, and lips as thick as the ball of a man's hand.

"Afternoon, afternoon, Mr. Marshall!" boomed Whiskey Pete, thrusting out a huge hand. "Welcome to *Cantina Grande*. As the Spanish say, 'My house is yours!'"

"That's sure white of you, Whiskey." Marshall took the outstretched hand and gave it a firm shake. "But you're a horse on me. How'd you know my name?"

"Simple!" chuckled Whiskey Pete. "Knowed you were comin', heard that you'd arrived this morning with the Skinny Buzzard. That's what we call Deeth Ranger in these parts. Ever'body is welcome outside of Ranger, an' he knows it. But still"—his one good eye narrowed to a slit—"I can be nice to him—even if it hurts me."

"You're still as sore as a boil because I tried to law you!" rasped Ranger. "I was within my legal rights. A lawyer has a right to take a case—"

"When and where he finds it, sure!" boomed Whiskey Pete. "'Honorable members of the bar,' and all that kind of hokum! I've had the pleasure of shooting a couple of 'em in the past. Step up, Mr. Marshall, I want to buy you a drink. That goes for you, Jules, an' the cowhan's with you. A lawyer pays for what he gets here."

"Wait a minute, Whiskey!" put in Marshall. "We didn't come for a drink. I want to talk to you. I came to ask you, first, if you know a man called Joe Handly—"

"Know 'im well!" exclaimed Whiskey Pete before Marshall could finish. "No better nor worse than the most of the boys who ride these parts. His credit's good. I have a redhead who's sweet on 'im, an' some of the other gals would like to cut her throat."

"Handly's dead." Marshall spoke quietly. "We picked him up this morning in the trail between the ranch and Los Chinos."

"That's funny." Whiskey Pete scratched his head, then turned to lift his voice into a boom of thunder. "Joe! *Joe Handly!* Come out here. Somebody says you're dead an' I won't believe it!"

And then the men behind Marshall gasped. A voice had answered Whiskey Pete. Right on the heels of the voice came a man—the very man from hat to boots, shirt, trousers and chaps that Marshall and Deeth Ranger had picked up dead in the trail.

CHAPTER VI

GUNMEN IN THE BUSHES

BUT . . . but you're dead, Joe!" Deeth Ranger pushed on beside Marshall and was tapping the cowboy on the chest with his clawlike right hand. "You . . . you're dead, I tell you, young man! We picked you up in the trail, shot all to thunderation, and we took your body on to the ranch!"

"But I'm not dead!" argued Handly good-naturedly. "I may be

three sheets in the wind drunk, Ranger, but I'm still alive. Damn it, I'm tellin' yuh I'm not dead!"

"You're dead, I tell you!" There was finality in the lawyer's croaking tone. "You're as dead as hell, and don't try to make me believe anything else."

"Say, what the hell is this?" Handly started to back away. "Are yuh crazy? I . . . I'm all right." He looked around. "Course to hell I'm all right, ain't I, Whiskey?"

"You'll never prove it by me," grinned Pete. "You look a mite peaked, Joe. Better believe what the Skinny Buzzard tells you. He's a lawyer, you know."

"I resent that, Whiskey!" Ranger whirled. One hand looked like it was about to fly to the butt of a gun, but it flinched away as if the lawyer thought better of it. Men in this room would kill for Whiskey Pete, that was a certainty. Along the wall stood a dozen gunmen, sleepy hawks just waiting for something to pop so that they could go for their guns.

"You can resent anything you like, you damned old buzzard." Whiskey Pete's voice was low and grinding. "I resent your comin' here. You know I don't like you; you know I'd like to slit your throat from ear to ear an' dump you in the river. But as for you, Mr. Marshall." He swung back to Marshall with an evil grin. "As I say, you an' your boys are right welcome to come callin' any time. If there's anything I can do to help, just name it."

"There is something you can do, Whiskey." Marshall laid his hand on the man's arm. "I'd like to talk to you—and Joe Handly, also. Is there some place where we can sit down?"

"You bet!" Whiskey Pete turned on his heel. "Follow me."

They walked back into another room and took seats at a table. Ranger did not go with them. Bristling with rage, he went back outside to his horse, climbed into his saddle and rode away, muttering and grumbling to himself.

"Ain't but one thing to it," Whiskey Pete was saying after a round of drinks had been downed. "Somebody that looked like Joe got 'imself shot. Somebody who was ridin' one of your good horses."

"And I'd almost swear that Joe and the dead man were the same." Marshall was having a hard time trying to convince himself that he was neither drunk nor dreaming. "Everybody at the ranch said it was Joe. Ranger said it the first thing. Where were you, and why aren't you at the ranch, Joe?"

"I quit—to be plumb plain," answered the cowboy. "Couldn't stand it up there no longer. I was here all night, too. Back there playin' poker with the boys."

WELL, it has us beat." Marshall was standing up and ready to leave after a half-hour's talk. "Better send up for your dead man, Whiskey. Some of the boys here should know him."

"He died on your hands." The big thick lips of the man twisted into another of his one-sided grins. "Finders is keepers. I wrop 'em in a strip of canvas an' bury what dies here. You bury what dies on the mountain. From how you describe the duck, he don't owe me no money, an' I reckon I owe him none. Will you have another drink—or maybe like for me to call in some of the gals an' give you a knock-down to 'em?"

"No, to both questions, Whis-

key," grinned Marshall, thrusting out his hand. "We'll be drifting. I want to get back to the ranch and to something that looks like a husky beefsteak. Every time we sit down to eat up there somebody, it seems, gets killed."

"Likely place you've got, no foolin'," laughed Whiskey Pete. "I don't envy you for it. But come an' see us when you're lonesome. We've got ever'thing—except mystery."

"That's fine." Marshall was still grinning. "If you need mystery we'll send you down a couple of barrels of it with our compliments."

They rode away, leaving him at the hitch rack, waving at them. Not until they had placed over two miles of trail behind them did Jules Jule try to strike up a conversation.

"You seem to feel extra well about something, boss," he observed.

"I do." Marshall looked at him quickly. "I feel extra well about Joe Handly."

"I don't." There was a surly note in Jule's voice. "I'll swear I don't. The idea of my riding with a man all this time, then getting fooled out of my boots. Damn it, I still believe it was Joe Handly who was killed!"

"I wouldn't give two cents for your judgment," began Marshall, "after making such a mistake—Now what?"

The sound of a sudden burst of shots drummed in the brush ahead of them. There was a slight pause, then the shooting broke out again, this time a wild thundering of sounds.

"Somebody's jumped old Deeth Ranger!" yelled Jules Jule, throwing the spurs to his horse like a madman. "Come on! Some of that damned bunch at Whiskey's sneaked out ahead of him and are trying to cut the old man's sign down!"

Many things were going through Marshall's thoughts when those shots sounded. He had been congratulating himself. He had learned a few things down at Whiskey Pete's *Cantina Grande.*

Whiskey Pete and Deeth Ranger were good friends. All the talk between them had been mere acting, and though Whiskey Pete had told Jules Jule he was a welcome guest any time he came, there was a wall of hell and damnation between those two. It was patent that they would kill each other if given the ghost of an opportunity to fight, and yet there was something that kept them away from each other's throats.

That "death" of Joe Handly was something else. Now that Marshall had seen Handly, he knew no one could have mistaken him for the dead man. The Joe Handly in Whiskey Pete's looked like the dead man. He was of the same size. He wore the same clothing, and yet there was a difference. The Joe Handly of Whiskey Pete's had a wart the size of a man's thumbnail on the left side of his nose. No man would have missed that. No man at Rancho del Diablo *had* missed it.

And there was that hellish knife in the desk of the half-finished Bible. Marshall attached a great deal to that wicked, three-edged sword. No one except Don Juan Sebastian had even thought to mention it to him. Even Don Juan had waited until the last moment, and Marshall had been close to the stone in the floor that operated its deadly mechanism.

It all meant but one thing: If the new owner of Rancho del Diablo happened to meet with a trifling little accident—some little thing like getting his heart split wide open—then no one could possibly be

blamed. And that meant the new owner had no friend here, except possibly the crazy Don Juan.

THEN there was the strange woman, the girl in black. Where had she come from? What the devil was she doing at the ranch? Why had she been going through the trunk and the bags? What was she looking for and hoping to find? Did she suspect him of being someone else? And then where had she vanished to so quickly, leaving a dead man in a closet behind her? Or did she know there was a dead man in the closet?

It was all too much for a man to understand just yet, but it had put Marshall on his guard. It meant that his life was in danger, that it had been in danger from the moment he stepped from the down-river stage in Los Chinos.

For men here killed quickly, without a shadow of hesitation. Life was something cheap to them, not worth bothering about. And every-one of these men rode in the shadow of danger. All of which meant that some tremendous game was going on here, something vast, desperate; and the old mission was but an excuse, a stepping-stone. Not for one moment did Marshall believe that tale about the Eye of Heaven—or whatever Don Juan's crazy bellowing and yowling had named it.

And yet there was something. There simply had to be. Don Juan Sebastian was protected here. He could do things no other man could do and live to talk about them. It wasn't his age that protected him. Yes, surely, Don Juan Sebastian had some tremendous hold over these killers.

The shots ahead stopped all thought about it for the moment. The first explosions had been dull and heavy, the unmistakable barking of six-shooters. Now they were keener, carrying a sharper *crack!* that had the unmistakable report of rifles.

Going on up the steep trail at as fast a pace as their horses could do, they soon came in sight of Deeth Ranger. The old man had been waiting for them up there in the enormous cluster of tall rocks and low trees, and the shots were bursting beyond him, coming up from a line of cliffs bending away down a deep gorge toward the river in a long half circle.

But Deeth Ranger was having no part in the shooting. Deeth Ranger was merely a grinning spectator. Marshall could see that at once. The lawyer had dismounted and stood there looking over the rocks while the firing grew in volume along the cliffs as more and more gunmen appeared to join it.

"What's the war about?" demanded Marshall as he plunged up with the others at his heels and lightly threw himself out of his saddle. "It sounds like they're trying to blow the lid off hell down there."

"But they're not getting very far with all their noise and blowing," chuckled Ranger, seemingly enjoying the battle. "It's Nix Wyatt, the sheriff from Los Chinos, and the rest of his law crowd. Seven of them. There they are." He lifted a long talon to point down the slope to a dense grove of trees and brush. "The other crowd's got them in the bushes, and they're keeping them there. Nix Wyatt's no man to take chances when he doesn't have to take them, Mr. Marshall."

"Yes, but who's the other crowd?" Marshall was now standing there beside the man. Jules Jule and the two cowboys had dismounted and were watching over

the rocks just below them. "They seem to be fighting a rousing battle with somebody in holes in the cliffs."

"They are!" nodded Ranger. "And little good it'll do Nix and his law dogs when it's all said and done. When men fight back at you from the cliffs, well, you just don't get anywhere, Mr. Marshall. Those cliffs are full of holes, hundreds and hundreds of them, one line of old caves after another. Labyrinths would be a better name, winding cavities, bottomless pits and tunnels that run clear to hell and gone; another of the Sierra de Cielo's mysteries that no man really understands."

"But who are the men in the holes?" insisted Marshall, knowing that Ranger was deliberately avoiding the question. "We thought some of Whiskey Pete's crew had jumped you up here."

"Whiskey Pete's filth wouldn't dare!" Given the pinch of an opportunity, Ranger was trying to avoid the question again. "They know better. They might kill me, but—well, I have a lot of friends, Mr. Marshall. Yes," he scowled as Marshall gripped his arm firmly, "I know what you're going to ask again. 'Who's Nix Wyatt fighting?' I don't know. You'll have to ask Nix, if he gives you an opportunity. He may just ride off when the show's over. A peculiar man, not much talk at times, at others a geyser of conversation. But you'll always notice"—a strange twinkle came into the blue eyes—"that Nix never tells you more than he wants to tell. He's smart in several ways."

"An' look!" cried one of the cowboys. "Nix an' his bunch are gettin' thrown back! There's more an' more scrappers showin' up there in them holes. They're playin' hell among the yearlin's with Nix an' his crowd now!"

"Yeah, an' look what's comin'!" exclaimed the second cowboy. "A bunch from Whiskey's! I wonder what side they'll take!"

"There's Whiskey, himself," said Jule, speaking in a cool tone. "Whiskey on his big black mule—the devil, himself, in the saddle and coming to beat hell!"

MARSHALL saw the man then. There was no doubt about it being Whiskey Pete. Behind him rode six others, each a wildly yelling hellion brandishing a rifle over his head and shouting something to the sheriff and his men down there.

"And now we'll watch them all get licked!" chuckled Ranger. "They won't have a chance."

"Then," Marshall's eyes narrowed, "you knew from the start that Whiskey Pete would take sides with the law? That's a little odd, isn't it, considering the way Whiskey hates the law and anything connected with it?"

"Anything's odd here, damn it, Marshall!" Ranger whirled. For a moment there was a dangerous light in his eyes, and Marshall could have sworn that the old devil was about to grip his hand to the butt of one of his black six-shooters. But the light faded from the eyes as quickly as it had come, and Ranger's false teeth glinted in a smile. "You see," his tone had become almost gentle, "you can never tell what to expect. One day one crowd's fighting with the other. The next day they're fighting *for* each other. I never try to understand it. It doesn't pay to try to understand too much, Mr. Marshall."

"I think I'm beginning to catch

the point," said Marshall grimly. "The best thing, I suppose, is not to ask questions."

"Now you *are* catching the point!" Ranger told him. "Life's too sweet to worry about. Now take me—"

"Look ag'in!" cut in one of the cowboys. "There's a woman up there! I'll swear it is! See! To the right of them pines! In the mouth of that gray hole! An' she's fightin' back to beat hell"

Marshall saw her. There was no doubt about it being a woman, and it was the woman he had caught going through his trunk and his bags. Her shiny black silk dress glinted in the lowering sunlight. She was taking desperate chances up there. Marshall saw a rifle butt jerk to her shoulder. She took a split-second's aim and a pale puff of smoke made a halo around the muzzle of the rifle. It seemed nearly five seconds before the long-ringing crash of the weapon found its way to the slope, and with it came a wild, bawled-out oath.

"She dropped one of Whiskey's men!" wailed a cowboy. "Golly, that critter can shoot a gun better'n her men crowd."

"She-cats have long claws!" chuckled Ranger. "They always scratch better than the toms once you get them in the fighting mood. Whiskey doesn't seem to be doing much good."

Whiskey Pete was not. Marshall could see that at a glance. The giant had come with his crowd. Now one of his men was down, a big, blond man rolling backward over the rump of a plunging bay, a horse that, once freed of his rider, was racing back toward the *cantina*.

"What I need is a smoke," grinned Ranger a minute later, settling himself comfortably on a rock to watch the fight. "Got a cigar, Jules?"

"Best in the shop," grinned the foreman, removing a long, half-curling black stogie from somewhere about his person and passing it forward. "Help yourself."

Ranger took the stogie, eying it dubiously. "This thing seems to be made by the yard and sold by the foot! Stout enough to floor a mule. Well, here goes nothing, as the cowboys would say."

He struck a match and lighted the cigar. The tobacco glowed red for an instant. Then suddenly a small explosion blew the thing out of Ranger's mouth. The crooked stogie had turned into a bombshell. It blew Ranger's false teeth out, knocked his hat off.

With smoke clouding his face, the lawyer came raging to his feet. Only Marshall's restraining hands prevented murder right there on the spot.

"I didn't know it was loaded, you damned old fool!" yelled Jule. "Whiskey Pete smokes them all the time. He gave it to me. I thought about you and brought it along. I'll swear I didn't know it was loaded. Mr. Marshall saw Whiskey give it to me!"

"Whiskey Pete did give it to him!" bellowed Marshall, throwing the old man back and keeping between him and the big foreman.

"And I'd kill Whiskey if he was here!" raged Ranger. "It might have put my eyes out. It did crack my upper plate, damn it."

The fight below was forgotten for several minutes. Marshall thought he was going to have to knock the old man down, but Jule moved away, and gradually it became quiet again save for the savage ringing of shots and Ranger's mumbling and cursing between spasmodic fits of examining his teeth.

the ranch. We've got a lot to report, Nix."

"More killings!" The sheriff's eyes narrowed again, but a thin smile twitched his lips. "How many this time?"

"Three, we think," replied the lawyer, turning to his horse and swinging himself into the saddle. "One came back to life. That is, we *think* that, too."

"Well, me and my bunch haven't had dinner, but we can eat when we get to the ranch," the sheriff said. "We can talk as we ride, gents."

But talking as they rode did not clear up anything. To Marshall's ever-growing amazement, he saw that Sheriff Nix Wyatt was a man *who refused to get excited about* anything. Dead men evidently meant nothing to him. He even laughed when they told him of the bloodless man in the closet.

"Somebody belonging to the gang we were fighting, you can bet," he declared. "They're bad. Terrible, I tell you! They cut each other's throats, pin each other to stakes out in the sun, and play lots of other tricks."

"Tough crowds you have to handle along the river, Sheriff Wyatt," suggested Marshall. He had a hunch that this man and his crew were other keys in the mystery. "Small wonder that you open up shooting when you run into them."

"It's the only way to handle them," nodded the sheriff. "The only law they know is the law of force, Mr. Marshall. You shoot first and ask questions afterward."

WHEN they pulled up at the mission Don Juan's little bell seemed to greet them. The sound came from the mission, and following it came the usual splatter of wild laughter.

"The devil, himself," frowned the sheriff, glowering toward the mission. "Gives me the creeps every blasted time I hear the bell or that laugh."

"He scared us all to death today," put in Jules Jule. "Damned if he didn't sit down and start playing that old organ in there. None of us thought it would play. Thought it was stuffed full of rats, bats, and dust. I can still hear it ringing in my ears."

They went on into the long dinning room. Now with the law around everything seemed to hold its place. Huge, juicy steaks were served them. They ate almost in silence until big slabs of dried-apple *pie were put on the table.* The sheriff smacked his lips, and the big, pock-pitted Mexican cook spoke from the doorway to the kitchen.

"The last dead man, Señor Marshall," he began haltingly, as if not knowing where to begin, "he ees what you call gone."

"You mean the one who looked like the bats had drained him?" Deeth Ranger glanced up quickly, right hand dropping his fork on his plate with a nervous clattering.

"The wan, *si!*" nodded the Mexican. "I, Pedro, did not go to see heem. Eet is not the business of Pedro, but the cowboys tell me."

"He's gone, all right," agreed a cowboy by the name of Bud Leek, leaning in the doorway. "Yuh fellas said for us to watch 'im. Me an' Tom Bone was watchin' 'im, stickin' right there in the room. We got to wantin' a drink of water. Neither of us wanted to stay in that room alone with a dead man. Well, we stepped outside to the old pump at the corner of the mission. We wasn't gone more'n a minute an' a half at the very most, but when we

went back inside the body was gone."

"That's a hell of a note!" Jules Jule jerked himself out of his chair, his face suddenly pale with anger. "When I give an order around here I want it carried out, Bud. Where's Tom?"

"Right here." The second cowboy appeared, a long, lean-faced man in his thirties. "What Bud's told yuh is right. Somebody darted in an' out with the body. The only thing we found left was this."

The man came forward. Instead of going to Jule, he walked to Marshall, and handed him a woman's dainty little silk handkerchief, trimmed with the sheerest of blue lace. Marshall took it and instinctively lifted it to his nose. The faint, deliciously pleasing scent of lavender came to him. When he glanced up every man at the table was on his feet, watching him with fiercely intent eyes.

"It's mine," Marshall lied easily. "Pretty little girl on the train to El Paso gave it to me. It must have dropped out of my pocket and got kicked into sight when the body was being hurried from the room."

"Then—that's all right." A deep sigh of relief came from Sheriff Nix Wyatt. He relaxed and sank back into his chair. "At first I thought it had come from somebody we know in these parts as the Woman of Death?"

"And who the hell is that?" demanded Marshall. "Another ghost or the real thing?"

"We don't know exactly who she is," frowned the sheriff, avoiding Marshall with his eyes, "but we do know that death comes when she appears, and may God have mercy on your soul if she ever turns her eyes on you."

"And maybe," ventured Marshall, watching the man's lowered face and shifty eyes, "she's the one who was fighting back at you and Whiskey Pete from the cliffs this afternoon?"

"Maybe—and maybe not!" snapped the sheriff. "We don't guess at things here, Mr. Marshall. The sooner you find that out, the better for you. But around here, if you ever meet a black-haired, black-eyed woman so pretty she'll pin your ears back, you'd better shoot her heart out instead of waiting for her to pull a quick one and have you killed."

WHEN darkness came, Sheriff Nix Wyatt and his men were ready to leave the rancho. The lawman had talked and talked, but nothing he had said was convincing to Marshall. Wyatt was like a man merely spouting words, issuing warnings about this, about that. The others sided with him.

The meat of it all was, as Marshall got it, that by coming to Rancho del Diablo he was in a fair way to get himself killed—unless he saw an opportunity to get himself in with the right crowd. Once it looked as if Deeth Ranger and the sheriff were about to put some proposition up to him, but something, possibly a frown from the other men, caused them to sheer quickly away from that.

"I think I can play my cards fairly well with the right people if they come along." Marshall told them that as a parting shot, something to egg them on, and for an instant it looked as if Ranger and Wyatt were again ready to lay the ground work for some proposition. "I always try to swim with the crowd."

"You've got sense—and plenty of

it!" Sheriff Nix Wyatt beamed, and rubbed his hands like a miser about to dip them into a pile of gold coins. "Just keep that idea in mind, Mr. Marshall. It'll pay mighty well in the end. If anything comes my way, or if any chance comes for me to do you a turn and put you on the right trail, well, you won't find me holding back to help you."

With a promise to come back within a day or two, Deeth Ranger climbed into his old buckboard and followed them away down the trail toward Los Chinos. Something told Marshall that none of those men were going through to Los Chinos, but he kept his thoughts to himself. Every move he made was being watched, and he knew it. Jules Jule was keeping an eye on him. Four of the cowboys were idling about, with nothing to do, apparently, but lean lazily against a wall here and there and watch him. At last—and to Marshall's relief—it was time to go to bed.

"If you sleep in the mission," warned Jules Jule, "you've got more nerve than I have, boss. Better not do it. I wouldn't sleep three hours under that old roof for the whole damned ranch! Pedro, the cook, can fix a bed for you in the end of the dining room or you can sleep with us boys down at the bunkhouse. A man's always safer with a crowd around."

"But I've got to get used to it some time," parried Marshall. "I might as well start right in tonight. Only you better do one thing, Jule. Tell all the boys never to walk in on me while I'm asleep. I've got a nervous trigger finger, and with all that's been going on here I'll be inclined to shoot first and ask questions afterward."

"And if anything happens"—Jules Jule's eyes narrowed in the shadows—"in spite of your itchy trigger finger, I suppose you want the body sent back to Montana?"

"Nope," grinned Marshall, "just give my regards to the buzzards. But be sure you tell the boys what I said. I'll sleep with a cocked gun in each hand tonight."

He walked on, conscious of Jules Jule's dark eyes following him. It was really ghostly in the old bedroom when he walked in and struck a match. The dark panels of the walls seemed to stare at him. Once he thought he could catch the sounds of a vague whispering beyond one great panel.

The sound of Don Juan's bell kept coming to him faintly as he undressed, blew out the light, and slipped into bed, knowing that he was being watched from some point outside. The shadows were dense in the great room now and the whole mission seemed to wrap itself in a breathless, brooding silence.

Marshall waited, lying there listening, his .45s slipped down in the bed beside him. Jules Jule had said something about always having a guard walking around the yard at night. That guard tonight would serve a double purpose. Marshall knew that. The guard's duty would be to watch and see—above everything else—that he remained in his room.

He waited until everything was quiet outside, and then noiselessly slipped out the side of the bed. He dressed as quickly as he could, keeping down beside the bed, and then set about making a dummy of himself with one of his bags, a pillow and a blanket. When he had finished and was standing back in the shadows trying to think of what his first moves were going to be, he thought he heard something gliding

In the faint light, Buck recognized the woman—she was his lady of mystery.

along with a rustling sound inside the wall at his back.

QUITE suddenly it came to him that he was not alone in the room. A faint, dark rustling had sounded to his right. In the shadows he saw something moving. For a moment it looked like great, pulsating wings beginning to spread, to grow into an enormous shape. It was enough to chill a man's spine, and a man with fewer cold, calculating thoughts would have opened fire on it with his six-shooters.

A voice finally spoke, one as low as the faint sighing of a breath.

"You are a brave man. I knew it this afternoon."

"And you are a brave woman." He barely breathed that back to the shadow. "Only a brave woman would have dared to walk in here on a man who had a couple of .45s in his hands, especially when the man's so scared his heart's in his throat. You are, I take it, my beautiful lady of mystery?"

"I am the woman in black," the shadow whispered back.

"And, perhaps, the lady I heard about in the dining room?" he ventured. "The one I was told to shoot on sight?"

"I was in the wall behind you when you were given the handkerchief." The voice was soft, pleasing. "It was a gallant gesture, Mr. Marshall. Something told me I could trust you from the beginning, from the instant I looked at you. Will you please come this way? The dummy in your bed should suffice for the prying eyes that will look into your window tonight. And it was very wise of you to tell Jules Jule what you did about sleeping with cocked guns. I trust that will be enough to keep them out of your room."

He moved toward her, the big guns snugly shoved into his holsters. Her hand reached out, cool and soft as it closed on his hand. Without a word he followed her as she stepped behind the panel and the old wood closed without a sound at their backs.

"Careful," she whispered. "We dare not have a light yet, but I am taking you where we can talk without fear of any one overhearing us."

She started to lead the way downward. Cold stone steps were underfoot. From somewhere in the distance he heard the slow drip of water. They kept on, the woman's hand still gripping his hand. They turned a bend. Now they seemed to be following a winding stairway going right down into the bowels of the earth. After the third turn the woman pressed Marshall's hand as a signal for him to halt.

It took a couple of seconds for her to open a door. Here now was a light leaping like a thin sword blade in Marshall's face. It was a dull light, one well shadowed by its distance from him, and yet it blinded him after being in that total darkness of the passageway. He shook his head, blinking his eyes rapidly to clear them.

"Careful, señor," said a voice, "the last step is dangerous."

The speaker was Don Juan, and the man put out his hand to take the newcomer by the arm. Marshall stood there for a moment, his eyes still blinking. Gradually a great underground room was taking shape in front of him with huge, cobwebbed beams overhead. Then he saw oblong old oak boxes standing in tiers along the walls, rack upon rack of them, the passageway be-

tween them a dusty aisle with the dancing flames of two candles burning at the other end of it.

"We need you in our confidence." The woman now turned to Marshall. There is no time left for us to wait to see how far we can trust you. We must gamble at once, and I gamble on your face, Mr. Marshall. Death has struck too often here for me to fear it if you fail us and our cause."

"But . . . but where the deuce are we?" he muttered, still staring at the oblong boxes of old wood. "This place looks like some kind of a robbers' den, ma'am."

"It is far from a robbers' den," put in Don Juan in a cool, sane voice. "You are in the tomb of the ancient padres, señor. The padres and those who were the faithful to their cause. It is the entombing place that was used when the mission was a house of God instead of the headquarters of men who murder for a song and who would wreck a nation for the miserly gold they can glean from the wrecking. Shall we go on, Panchita?" He turned to the woman. "Or shall the talk be here?"

"We will go on," ordered the woman. "If we trust this far we must trust all the way. I was going through your trunk and bags this afternoon just to make certain of your identity, Mr. Marshall. But"—she turned back to Don Juan —"you might introduce me to Mr. Marshall and tell him who I am to end some of the mystery."

"A thousand pardons," bowed the old man. "A thousand pardons, Señor Marshall! May I present Señorita Panchita de la Montanya, my niece, a lady of true Spanish blood, and an agent of your honorable American Secret Service."

CHAPTER VIII

VULTURES GATHER

THEY did not talk there in the tomb of the ancients where the bones of the padres and their loyal followers lay in their stout coffins. Don Juan Sebastian led the way. His niece followed, and Marshall followed her, carrying one of the candles to help light the way while the old man carried the other. The crux of the mystery seemed to lay before them now. They passed through another panel. Here it was dangerous, and Don Juan spoke in a low voice of warning.

"It is wet, and it is slippery here," he cautioned them. "The old water system leaks in places. The water comes from a great spring on top of the peak west of us. A slip here, and we are gone forever into the Well of a Thousand Years. The old Bible speaks of it, but it does not tell all its secrets."

Marshall saw the thing then. It was to their right, a yawning pit in the rocks, large enough for a horse to slip into it. A misstep here would mean death, and Marshall took the woman's arm, though there seemed to be no need to aid her. Señorita Panchita de la Montanya had been along this slippery way before.

"It gives me the chills," she whispered as if cringing away from the hole. "Listen to this, Señor Marshall."

She reached down, picking up a loose stone as large as her hand. She flung it. It went into the well, a tumbling, tossing thing going down and down, and the old rocks down there sent up sounds that were like the chiming of some musical monster stirring to life with a wild whispering and soft pealing.

"Once I saw my uncle toss into it a lighted ball of yarn soaked with oil," the woman told Marshall. "It went down and down. It seemed all of five minutes before the last of the light could be seen."

"What did the old padres use it for?" Marshall asked curiously.

"The same thing it has been used for of late," she explained. "When the padres suffered raids here from the Indians, they were forced to drop the bodies of the guilty into it. That is what my uncle meant when he spoke of the Well of a Thousand Years. Why it was called that no one knows, unless it is because of its great depth and the bodies it will hold until Judgment Day."

They were soon mounting another long flight of stone stairs. Marshall hadn't the slightest idea where they were going. They climbed at least fifty steps, followed another narrow passageway for thirty yards or more, and then passed through a low doorway. In a minute more they were in a comfortable room filled with ancient furniture. There were no windows, but gentle drafts of air came from somewhere.

"And now we are here," smiled the woman. "Will you have a seat, Señor Marshall? I believe we can talk here without the fear of an interruption."

He took a deep chair at a table after drawing up one for her. Don Juan Sebastian, too, sat down. That strange, dismal look was coming back into his face, showing that his mind was going back on him again. Just now he did not seem interested in anything that was going on in the room.

"I won't keep you waiting for what I am going to say," Señorita de la Montanya began, "I'll come directly to the point. I am with the Secret Service, as my uncle has said. I am here with others to break up smuggling into Mexico and into the United States."

"Orientals, I suppose?" Marshall leaned forward, lighted cigar in his hand. "The usual thing, I believe?"

"Not this time, Señor Marshall." The Woman shook her head. "Narcotics are coming in from Mexico. Guns and ammunition are going into Mexico from this side of the border. I suppose you saw the large wagons down at Whiskey Pete's this afternoon? Well, those wagons are loaded with guns and ammunition for another revolution certain politicians want to bring about in Mexico. Yes, that is true. You may wonder how it is all being done. That is what we are trying to solve, and yet we know a little something about it. The guns go in through holes in these cliffs. Through some tunnel that goes under the river. Naturally, the narcotics come out the same way. Our task is to find where those guns go in Mexico, to whom they are going. When we discover that, we'll know where to deal our coming revolution a blow to the heart, and just where to stop the inflow of the narcotics to this side of the river. Am I making myself clear?"

"Perfectly," he nodded. "You could seize the wagons today, but that would spoil the picture. You would get but one consignment of guns—"

"And no narcotics," she finished. "Both governments are lending all co-operation. The State of Texas is helping also. You will notice that we have no Texas Rangers down here. They're keeping out of it to give us full rein."

"And who is working against you?" he demanded bluntly.

"Let's first eliminate those who are not working against us." She

smiled wearily. "Pedro, your cook, and my uncle are not working against us. All the others are, Whiskey Pete, his crew, every other man at Rancho del Diablo outside of yourself, and half the people in Los Chinos. Naturally they're headed by Sheriff Nix Wyatt. That is why Wyatt and Whiskey Pete were trying to kill off some of my men this afternoon. By the way, I think you know without my telling you that you are placing yourself in a very grave danger?"

"Damned grave, if you ask me!" interjected a mocking voice behind them. "Watch it! *Don't anybody move an eyebrow!*"

IN the low doorway stood Jules Jule, with his big pair of .45s filling his hands. At either side of him were others, the hawklike face of Deeth Ranger peering over Jule's shoulder, Sheriff Wyatt standing behind the lawyer. Every man's hand bristled with guns, the candlelight playing along the polished barrels, their muzzles covering the room.

"It'd be nice now"—a thin, hard smile streaked the big foreman's face —"if Don Juan Sebastian would just get up and jingle his damned little bell. Marshall, I guess, was just a shade too dumb to know that we had a man already planted behind the head of his bed when he went to his room. Easy—*all of you!*" His voice rose into a crash, and his hands seemed to grip the guns tighter, the fingers about to pull the triggers as he glowered at the woman. "The luck of the dice is running against you, if you know what I mean, you black-eyed little mink!"

"Don't stand barking like a dog!" croaked Deeth Ranger's voice. "Move on in there, you damn fool, and relieve our friend, Mr. Marshall, of his guns. At the same time, you'd better take the fighting tools the pretty cat has inside her dress. She can handle a gun, you know—or should know by this time."

"Yes, I do know!" snarled Jule, coming forward slowly, black eyes wary. "We've seen plenty of her gun work in the past. Don't move, Marshall! I don't like you, and haven't from the start. You're just a shade too damn easygoing to suit the speed of my blood pressure, Montana!"

A few moments later Marshall stood with his hands bound behind his back. Don Juan Sebastion—age nor anything else no longer considered—stood with his hands bound behind his back. Señorita Panchita de la Montanya, her luminous eyes as glittering as death itself, leaned against the wall, her relaxed attitude showing philosophic resignation, but the eyes and face revealing a fighting spirit that would never die.

"We were all set and waiting here for you, Marshall," Jules Jule mocked, his face a twisting mask. "We even had an idea what you'd be like. Deeth Ranger started work on you the moment you arrived in Los Chinos. Deeth loves dramatics. Deeth is just a trifle more than a lawyer, Marshall. He killed your damned uncle, in case you're interested. Not with his own hand, of course. The tinhorn lawyer in him wouldn't let him do that. And I killed the man you found in the trail. Death doesn't mean a hell of a lot to me. I'm a dirty damned rat, if you want to call me that, and when you came I knew I'd kill you before I was done.

"However," he laughed suddenly, "I am not here to browbeat you. The party I want to cuss in this

crowd is this woman!" He whirled upon her as if about to lift his fist and strike her down on the spot.

"And you, too, you damned old battle-ax," he turned to Don Juan Sebastian, "I'm tired of playing games with you. There's a diamond in this building, larger than a man's two fists. You weren't just talking out of your head when you spoke of the Eye of Heaven! You were speaking of the ancient jewel of the Incas, something the damned Spanish took away from their old temples.

"Something"—he paused, glaring around the room—"of very great value. It's a great diamond found in South America long ago. A diamond such as no other people on the face of creation have ever seen before. Deeth Ranger couldn't resist it. Nix Wyatt couldn't resist it. None of this scum," he sneered, "could resist it. Deeth Ranger is so damned old he couldn't even hope to benefit by the money he would receive from it and yet, he would not be denied, the old devil."

"I've heard enough from you!" croaked Deeth Ranger, his face more terrible and buzzardlike than ever now. "You'll take orders from me, Jules Jule!"

ORDERS from you!" The big foreman laughed. "Behind you stand half the men of this rancho, each one of them ready to shoot you down—and that includes the honorable sheriff of Los Chinos, standing there with his guns so handy to let you have it in the back. Look around you, buzzard-face, before you crow so long and loudly. I'm the spokesman here, not you, not Whiskey Pete, not anyone else. All these riders of Rancho del Diablo are my men. I gave the word for Rube Washburn to be killed. That was the man you thought was Joe Handly," he explained to Marshall. "What I say here tonight will go. We don't need you, Marshall, and when I don't need a man at Rancho del Diablo —well, I damned soon get rid of him, just as you will see."

They were marched out of the room a few minutes later. Deeth Ranger was raving like a maniac. His guns had been stripped from him. The cowboys, who seemed to hate him, sneered in his face, and one burly, overbearing puncher had slapped him sprawling on the floor with a side-mauling blow to the face.

Marshall himself walked with the muzzle of a .45 gouging him in the back. Panchita de la Montanya had her hands bound behind her, and Don Juan Sebastian and the burly cowboy who had slapped Ranger down brought up the rear.

"You'll not get far with this, Jules Jule!" The old lawyer was still raging. "You're a fool to think you can break away from my crowd. Whiskey'll hang you to a limb by your front teeth."

"Quit talking about my breaking away!" Jules Jule gave Ranger a resounding slap across the back of the neck. "It was my play that started the gun running and the dope exchange for the guns. You and Whiskey Pete simply horned in with all the lies you could muster, and once you were in I was out with only a widow's mite to show for my money and all my pains. Tonight you have four thousand rifles and thirty thousand rounds of ammunition to go through the hole. It'll go through, but neither you nor Whiskey Pete will boss it this time. I'm taking over, Deeth."

"You won't take over!" They were right above the dangerous old Well of a Thousand Years when

Deeth Ranger whirled, seemingly ready to fight, in spite of his bound hands. "You can't do it, you fool! The gang across the border won't trade with you!"

"That's where you're wrong, you old buzzard." The crowd had come to a halt, jammed together there on the narrow, dangerous walkway. "The mob across the border will trade. I still have a couple of friends over there, men who know I started this business—men who know how you and Whiskey Pete oozed in on me and pushed me out of the running. The crowd over there will swap narcotics for whoever brings the guns, and I have men working with the wagons who'll be there when they're unloaded tonight and the guns and ammunition are carried into the hole at the foot of the cliffs. What I want just at the moment is to wipe out that black-eyed woman's crew who're hiding in other holes in these cliffs and trying to help her put us all down."

"But . . . but," stammered Ranger, his voice croaking with rage, "I'm telling you, you damned fool, that Whiskey Pete's been expecting something like this. We're all set. You can't put us down, I tell you!"

"Can't put you down!" Jules Jule's jarring burst of laughter filled the passageway. "That gives me an idea, Deeth. As I told Marshall, when I'm through with a man, I'm through with him. Here's a good chance to prove it to everybody in this little crowd—and to you best of all!"

"No! No!" Deeth Ranger's wild cries suddenly filled the passageway with a crazy burst of sound. No longer was there any anger in the voice. It was a voice of mad terror and nothing short of it—the screeching, wailing and shrieking of a man with death suddenly staring him in the eye. "Don't do it, Jules! *Don't! Don't!*"

Marshall could see what was happening. Jules Jule had stepped forward quickly, seizing Ranger by the arm. With the strength of a bull suddenly making a charge, he was swinging the old lawyer to the right and left, a killer terrorizing his kill, shaking him from side to side, and moving him back toward the bottomless well behind him.

"*Don't!*" Marshall's own voice lifted. "For God's sake, Jule, show at least a human streak somewhere in your make-up!"

"Keep out of it, you!" Jule turned his head, firing a wild glance back over his shoulder. "Keep out of it unless you want to go with the old buzzard!"

He continued to shake Ranger, who was still crying out at the top of his lungs, his leathery old face now as bloodless as sun-cured rawhide, the long coat tails flapping, his feet shuffling to try to keep him in some form of balance.

"EASY, Jule!" Sheriff Nix Wyatt had suddenly slipped past Marshall, one of his big guns in his hands. He brought the weapon up, planting the muzzle of it squarely in the big foreman's back. "We don't go quite as far as all that. We don't go quite that far because you're not as strong with the crowd as you think. Turn him loose—*and don't let him slip,* damn you! I played with Deeth Ranger before I started playing with you. Tonight I'm still playing with Deeth Ranger, and the men you think are standing with you are standing only so far."

"So it's a double cross all the way around?" Slowly, turning his head

to look back over his shoulder, Jule released Ranger and raised his hands. "I might have known it."

"Knowing it now is soon enough." A dry, mirthless chuckle came from the sheriff. His left hand moved forward, slipping the foreman's big six-shooters from their holsters. "I used you, Jules. I used you just so far. We needed you in the game." His tone dropped to a low, hushed whisper that was like the soft purring of some great cat. "We don't really need you now, Jules."

He gave the man's guns a sling. They rattled on the rocks and plunged into the yawning hole at their feet. Marshall heard them going down and down, bouncing and rebouncing on the ragged shelves of rocks. It seemed almost a minute before the sheriff spoke again.

"Now take your knife, Jule, and cut those strings off of Deeth's wrists. Go on, damn it!" He gave the man a fierce gouge with the muzzle of his six-shooter. "Move when I speak to you!"

"You've got me, Nix!" From the crowing bully of only a moment before, Jule had turned into a whimpering coward. His right hand fished in his hip pocket. It was coming out with a knife when Deeth Ranger's croaking voice halted him.

"Don't cut the strings, Jules," the old man ordered in a hellishly quiet tone. "I'm going to use them on you. Thanks, Nix. You sure waited a hell of a long time to come to the rescue."

The strings were untied from his wrists. Then Jules Jule was prodded around by the muzzle of the sheriff's gun until his back was to Ranger. The latter drew the foreman's hands behind him, quickly lashing the wrists together.

"And now he's your turkey," chuckled the sheriff when the job was done. "You can do what you want to with him, Deeth."

"There's only one thing to do with carrion." Ranger's voice was still low, but there was something terrible in it. "That's to bury it before it gets to stinking."

"What . . . what are you going to do to me!" Jule's voice rose in a wild shriek. "Boys—somebody! *Somebody stop him!*"

But all the yelling and crying in the world could not have saved him. Deeth Ranger had given him a sudden shove. Small, loose stones rolled underfoot. A slipping, twisting and writhing thing, Jules Jule was carried backward by the shove. He teetered there on the lip of the well, ghastly-looking in the candlelight. Suddenly he was toppling backward, his wail rushing up, then dying away like a sound being rapidly hauled far, far off into the distance by a hurricane.

"A good finish, gents!" exclaimed a voice as the wailing ceased and only a muffled thudding and thumping kept coming out of the well. "I couldn't have done it better, myself."

Whiskey Pete had appeared, walking noiselessly out of the gloom.

CHAPTER IX

THE CURSE OF THE INCAS

"NICE work—smooth!" commented Whiskey Pete after they walked on and were in the huge old livings quarters of the mission. "Have a seat for a few minutes, folks." He spread an expansive, mocking hand toward chairs. "I never believe in rushin' matters. Like I didn't believe in rushin' Jules. We let him do all the waitin' an' watchin', let 'im catch our Woman of Death." He chuckled, and the chuckle caused spas-

modic jolts and jerks of his huge stomach. "An' now Jules is nicely out of it. Better keep a close eye on Sam Dode, boys." He nodded to the burly cowboy who had slapped down Deeth Ranger in the room beyond the old well and who now stood there sullenly against the wall with his hands lashed behind his back. "We can use him as a sort of dray to tote guns and heavy ammunition boxes when we start the delivery at midnight. Afterward"—his eyes narrowed and the tremendously thick lips curled—"I'll turn 'im over to Deeth. Deeth'll probably want to shove a gun to the handle in his belly just to see how high he'll jump when the hammer falls." He turned to Marshall. "How do you like Rancho del Diablo by this time, Mr. Marshall?"

"So far," Marshall kept his tone to normal, knowing that hot words here would be the worst thing a man could bring to his tongue, "I'd say it has a thrill a minute. I've seen enough dead men to do me for the rest of my life."

"Men have to die," Whiskey Pete chuckled. "Jules managed to kill a few. He killed the fellow you thought was Handly because he thought he was trying to get away with something. The man who was killed in the mission with the big knife thing must have been one of Miss Montanya's crew, eh, señorita?"

"He was, if it will help you any," admitted the woman quietly. "He disobeyed orders by prowling about in the mission. The man who was found in the closet was some one who had evidently been planted in there by Jules Jule as a scare for this gentleman." She nodded to Marshall. "He was also one of my men. His veins opened, and the blood let out to make it appear that the vampires killed him. Afterward, the remaining blood was washed away, and the man was brought here. My men snatched him away."

"Then," put in Marshall, "the big bats really don't go for human blood?"

"They will take blood where they find it," answered the woman. "But, as far as I know, they have never attacked a man. What they live on is a mystery, but I do suspect them of settling on sleeping cattle or horses when opportunity presents."

"You talk well, ma'am." Whiskey Pete was coming back into the conversation. "Maybe you can tell us about the supposed big diamond that's here?"

"My uncle alone knows the secret, if there is such a gem here." Something told Marshall that the woman was not telling the truth now. "And the secret is locked inside his poor, crippled brain. He has been robbed, beaten, and abused for years because of it. My aunt was killed because of it. That scar you see on my uncle's head is where a man struck him down with a belt ax trying to make him talk. If there is such a diamond, I think it will remain a mystery throughout eternity."

"Not with us, it won't!" croaked Deeth Ranger as half a dozen more of Whiskey Pete's ruffians came slouching into the room. "And it's here. There's been too much talk for it not to be here. It's the curse of this place, and yet it's worth more than all the gun running and dope smuggling could bring a man in twenty years. Don Juan's going to talk. He's played crazy long enough—too long to suit me. I'm tired of it, and we're all tired of it."

"Sit down a minute, Deeth." Whiskey Pete held up his hand. "I want to tell the lady a few things.

The guns are going through. We wiped out four of her men tonight."

MARSHALL glanced at the woman as Whiskey Pete paused as if to allow the words to take full effect on her, and he saw her face turn pale and her eyes cast swift, startled glances about her.

"We caught them off guard," Whiskey Pete was going on, his voice a lazy drone, his eyes two glinty little streaks watching the woman's face. "Guns in their backs stuck their hands skyward. Four knife strokes did the rest an' kept down the noise. I've always been particular about little things like useless noises, ma'am. How many more have you working on your side? You might as well tell us. I'm a man who finds out things."

"There . . . there are others," stammered the woman helplessly. "More than you will ever know from my lips."

"You talk well, an' you lie well." Whiskey Pete's thick lips curled in a harsh little smile. "But your men talked better, ma'am. The four we butchered like pigs tonight told ever'thing. They're the last you had right here with you. That's why you got so keen to hook Mr. Marshall in to help you. Sorry, Mr. Marshall"—he looked at Marshall with wicked little lights dancing in his eyes—"but you won't help much. You'll see a damned good show, though, an' maybe I'll give you a peep at that big diamond before we send you cart-wheeling after Jules Jule. Sorry for that also, Mr. Marshall, but we have to keep our own necks out of government halters, an' it seems the only way."

He stood up suddenly, his entire manner changing, the huge face becoming beastly. For a long time he stood there staring at Don Juan Sebastian. Suddenly he snapped the fingers of his right hand and spoke to a tall man behind him.

"Bring in the box, Hank. We'll get it done. And you"—he stepped forward, a towering man mountain over the little don crowded back in a chair—"have got somethin' comin', Sebastian. For months I've been tryin' to find just one thing you're afraid of. You're afraid of rattlesnakes. Deathly afraid of them. You were once bitten by one. Almost died from the bite. The sight of one today makes you sick at that thin belly of yours. Tonight you'll see plenty.

"All right, boys." He stepped back, glancing at men all around the room. "Stretch him on the floor and rip his clothes off. I'll see if the snakes won't unlock that sick brain and start him talking."

"No! No!" The room was screaming with noise when the fiendish work started, and Marshall was yelling and begging with the señorita. "Anything but that!"

Other noises joined the screaming. Fierce rattling and hissing came from a stout wooden box whose sides were covered with a narrow mesh of black wire. Beyond the mesh twisting shapes were stirring like writhing lengths of poisonous red ropes.

The man with the box was bending over the terror-stricken Don Juan, a hellish leer on his face. As the old man squirmed and twisted backward on the floor the man with the box followed him, the fierce rattlers inside it striking at the wire.

"Don't!" screamed the woman again. "He can't . . . *can't tell you!*"

"He'll tell us how to find that diamond." Whiskey Pete's voice

was a low laugh. "Snakes are good medicine for some people. He'll talk or the side of the box will be held against his naked chest. An' you know what'll happen when the fangs start reachin' through the wire, ma'am."

"But . . . but he'll never talk." Suddenly the woman's voice was frightfully calm. "He can't. If you burned his feet off he couldn't tell you."

"Then maybe you can, ma'am." Whiskey Pete looked at her with a slow grin, his eyes twinkling with hellish little lights. "I'd just as soon have the information from you as anybody I know."

YES, I can tell." Marshall heard her sigh deeply, and saw her sink back in a chair as if all her strength was gone. "Take . . . the box away."

"Now you're talking!" croaked Deeth Ranger. "I've always said this woman could tell a lot if we ever got our hands on her. Go on, sister!"

"Yes, I could tell you everything." The woman nodded, the black eyes dreamy, her lips pale. "One of the old Montanyas was a padre. Don Juan Sebastian himself was born here." She looked at her uncle, and smiled sadly. "I, too, came here as a child. I loved it here and learned much about the place. That is why the Secret Service wanted me to help them stop the smuggling, to keep down a revolution. At any time I so minded, I could have had the diamond. Perhaps, at some time, I might have been tempted to take it."

"An' Don Juan had a big hacienda a hundred miles west of here, too!" put in Whiskey Pete in a breathless voice as if afraid of halting her. "Go on, beautiful!"

"A great hacienda, yes," nodded the woman. "It was burned to the ground over his head. After months of illness he came back here. I went to Spain, looking up more and more of the old records of the mission. Some day I hoped to own it, to be able to call it mine. Must I go on? Have you no imagination left?" She looked at them with a faint curl of her lips. "Shall I stop here and write you a book about it?"

"Hell, no!" croaked Deeth, rubbing his hands. "Just tell us where to get that big diamond. That's all I want to know, unless you can tell me where Don Juan got that damned bell—and why he's always clanking it?"

"That is simple, señor." She smiled. "Once Don Juan used to call his servants with it. It was his signal. When he rings the bell he thinks he is back in his hacienda summoning his servants to make right something that has not pleased him. A spot of dust here, a spot there. But I delay you." She looked at them, lips tightening. "You want the diamond. It is written that those who attempt to steal it shall beware, but you are men who do not beware of anything. Will you kindly bring in the old Bible? Perhaps I will not need to remind you to beware of the knife in the old desk."

"Now that's what I call real obliging," chuckled Whiskey Pete. "Outside with the box, Hank. If she tells the truth you can drown all them damned snakes in the waterin' trough by sinkin' the box in it an' settin' a heavy rock on it. An' after the Bible, you three fat dudes"—he turned to three men at his left—"but look out for that knife!"

IT is here. It has been here all the time." Señorita Panchita de la Montanya spoke in a low, almost dreamy voice as she stood beside the heavy table in the center of the room after the great old Bible had been brought in by three strained and perspiring men. "All the time it has been here, right before every man's eye who sought the secret."

The room was very still after that. The box of snakes had been taken away. Don Juan Sebastian had plucked his torn clothing around him and was again crouched in a chair, his eyes staring dazedly at the crowd.

Every man in the room seemed to be holding his breath. Whiskey Pete and Deeth Ranger were there beside the woman, their eyes glittering with greed. Ranger's lips worked, his tongue constantly darting out to moisten them. Finally the old lawyer spoke in a whispering croak of impatience.

"Well . . . well, *go on!*" he urged. "We haven't all night to stand here and wait for you to be so confounded dramatic about it!"

"I am not being dramatic." The woman was standing there with the front cover of the book lifted, her eyes staring at the wall. "I am just trying to think."

"There's nothin' for you to think about!" Whiskey Pete's voice was a nervous growl. "Come on! You started—an' the snakes aren't dead yet."

"It is all here." The woman pointed to the first writing in the book. "In that name. See?"

"I don't see a thing," snarled Ranger, "except some writing in Spanish that means that the book was inscribed to somebody called Bearebee, and that doesn't tell anything."

"It does." Again the woman raised her eyes, looking at the wall, the coloring in her face fading as if she was about to do some terrible, ghastly thing. Suddenly she bit her lip with almost bitter determination. Tears welled in her eyes. "Very well." She spoke as if to herself. "If curses there be upon the gem as it had been written, the curses will have to come. You men are forcing me to it. Now look at this, this one name. Or look at all of it. 'To Bearebee—Whose Portals All The Mystery Reveals'—"

"I've read that a hundred times, damn it!" rasped Ranger, hands clawing open and closed with impatience. "Explain it."

"The *Be-are-bee* is everything." She spoke slowly. "Cut up the name. It is not a name at all. *Be-are-bee.*"

"Sounds like plain 'B. R. B.' to me!" grunted Whiskey Pete, tracing the word with the tip of a hairy finger.

"Exactly," nodded the woman, suddenly closing the book. "Now find *B. R. B.* here." She pointed to the big medallion of metal and near-precious stones. "Find those letters, and you will have the secret."

"Get back, you skinny buzzard!" Whiskey Pete raked Ranger out of the way with a sweep of his arm. He was like a glittering-eyed hawk staring at the medallion. "Here they are!"

"Three fingers will cover them." The woman was looking at the well again. "Cover them with your finger tips, and press gently. The medallion will open—"

BULLY, gal, bully!" bellowed Whiskey Pete, cutting her short as a low, metallic *click* sounded. "Open *she is,* an' here's a strip of parchment." He stepped

back, scratching his head and scowling for a moment, his eyes bulging, then squinting. Slowly his head started to shake. "Hell!" He growled that. "It's in Spanish. Read it, ma'am."

"I don't need to read it," the woman said slowly. "It tells you that the head of the largest angel in the center of the altar is movable. Twist it to the right. Then move it back sharply to the left. A wood carving of an infant angel in the wall will swing open just above the large angel's head."

"Good enough—if you're not lyin'!" roared Whiskey Pete, crushing the strip of parchment to his bosom. "Half you boys go outside to keep a watch with the others to see that nobody comes snoopin' around. Some of you keep an eye on the prisoners an' bring them along with you. We'll see what we'll see!"

They were a noisy and an excited lot when they went banging into the old mission. Four men with drawn guns stopped halfway up the aisle behind Sam Dode, the cowboy, Marshall, the woman and the don. The others, led by Whiskey Pete and Deeth Ranger, were rushing or and mounting the altar in a greedy mob.

"So far, so good!" Whiskey Pete yelled that as he reached the largest angel and stepped upon a smooth stone in front of it with the rest of his crowd swarming around him. "It's workin'!"

Marshall saw Whiskey Pete's huge hands give the angel's head a twist to the right, saw the man's shoulders knot, and the big hands were giving the head a sharp twist back to the left.

A sharp *click!* of sound came from the black old wood above the tall angel's head. A concealed door flung open. Marshall caught a glimpse of something that was like an eye suddenly blazing with myriad colored lights.

"May the Lord have mercy on them," whispered the woman. "It will come. I know it will!"

And *it* came. Something sounded high above the altar. Marshall saw great wings of dust start flinging down, a cloud greater than that made by the flying vampires in the old towers. With the dust came a great gnashing, grating, smashing, and grinding.

Fierce yells tore up from the crowd on the altar. The whole ceiling above the altar was falling, great stones, timbers, black beams —a thundering mass coming down to swallow the terrific yelling and frantic crying.

Then wild yells tore upward behind Marshall. He whirled, and was just in time to see the three guards plunging out of sight in a black opening that had suddenly gaped in the floor.

"And now that the curse of the gem has happened," came the woman's voice, "we will escape. *Come!*"

Even as she spoke a wild burst of yells and the rapid firing of guns came from somewhere outside, and with the sounds came the mad patter and pound of racing feet.

CHAPTER X

PEACE COMES TO THE RANCHO

"THIS way, folks!" A tall, square-jawed man suddenly appeared in an opening in the wall. "Hurry. Hell's busted loose in the harness, an' it's got to be fast."

Marshall saw the woman dart toward the man. As if Sam Dode, the cowboy, could not do anything else,

he was following her. The don hesitated, and then turned with Marshall at his heels. They reached the man in the opening. He was busy freeing the señorita of the ropes around her wrist. Then he cut loose the don and Marshall.

"We'll just keep you as is," the man grinned when he came to Sam Dode. "Here, folks, help yourselves."

He was suddenly shoving guns into the hands of Marshall and the woman. Marshall—not yet able to understand just what was happening—glanced around for Don Juan. At the moment the man was gone, but Marshall saw him an instant later. He was racing back from the direction of the altar, and in his hands was the great, sparkling diamond.

"Take it!" cried the old man, thrusting the blazing jewel into Marshall's hands, "and put it inside your shirt. To you it belongs, as everything else here belongs to you. But . . . but Panchita did not lie to them about my not knowing where to find it. I once did know. I always almost knew. It was up here." He touched the terrible scar on his head. "It just would not all come to me."

Marshall did not wait to hear any more. He struck out, following the woman and the square-jawed man. Sam Dode was trotting along at their heels. The don followed Marshall.

Golden light showed above them when they turned up a steep stairway. It was moonlight, and soon they were on a balconylike overhang of the roof of the mission and looking down on what seemed like dozens of running, fighting figures below them.

"Let 'em have it!" The square-jawed man opened fire as he spoke. "Shoot at anybody close to the buildings. My men are keeping well back to pour it into them from all sides!"

"Fight!" cried the girl to Marshall when she saw him hesitating. "This man is a Federal agent. He's been working on the other side of the Rio."

"And we're winding up all this business tonight!" yelled the man, blazing away at a running figure below. "Panchita seems to have taken care of Whiskey Pete, himself, and Deeth Ranger, to say nothing of the bright sheriff of Los Chinos."

Then the whole mountain seemed to ring with shots. Men yelled, bawled, and went down, some of them sprawling, some appearing to crumple into knots. Marshall kept shooting. The sounds of running horses came to him several times. Fighting men out there in the moonlight were charging and recharging the old buildings. Men inside the buildings drove them back with their hot firing.

It looked as if everything was going to the devil in a hurry, and yet the fight dragged on and on. Marshall finally turned, making his way back down into the old mission. As he came out of the opening in the wall he saw something stirring in the shadows toward the altar. He crouched back and then recognized a rusty black shape that had managed to worm out of the débris and was moving from window to window to open fire with a six-shooter in his right hand while the left arm hung broken and as limp as a lifeless wing.

Deeth Ranger was up and about again! Marshall moved toward him in the shadows. He came up behind the old man, and suddenly caught him by the arm. Ranger tried to whirl. Marshall struck him

along the side of the jaw with the barrel of his gun, knocking him down and out. Then he picked up the limp form, flung it across his shoulder, and carried it up to the roof ledge.

"The main buzzard of the flock!" he exclaimed as he lowered Ranger at the Federal agent's feet.

"Just what we're looking for!" yelled the square-jawed man. "We've got Deeth Ranger!" He lifted his voice into a far-reaching wail, sending it spreading in every direction. "We've got Ranger! The old devil's alive!"

It had a tremendous effect on the firing below. The shots seemed instantly to start falling away. In a few minutes it was all quiet down there.

AND that was that!" Bent McCandles, the square-jawed Federal agent was chuckling two hours later as they sat in the great living room with every candle in the place burning. "Sorry to have had to give you such a hell-rousing welcome, Mr. Marshall, but you seemed to time your coming with the wind-up of our many months of hard work. To our little señorita, here, goes the credit for most of it. She's worked hard and needs a long vacation. A dozen times before this we've been on the verge of nipping everything in the bud. Always something went wrong."

Marshall was still a bit dazed by the quickness with which everything had happened. "But who the devil threw open that trapdoor under the feet of the guards behind us just as the ceiling above the altar fell? And where did the guards go?"

"Into the Well of a Thousand Years," replied McCandles. "I pulled the secret trigger on them, Mr. Marshall. I had to do it. We'll tell you everything as we go along. I want to get back to Panchita. As I said, she needs a vacation—"

"The vacation is here." The woman spoke tiredly as she sat there in a big chair facing Marshall with the old don seated near her. "I want to rest for years and years. I want no more government service, Mr. McCandles. You can have it. Tonight I am through. And now that everything is done, I'd like to stay here with my uncle in this old mission where it is really quiet when the murderers are taken away."

"You can stay here as long as you like!" exclaimed Marshall. "Always, if you will!"

"But . . . but you can't leave the service!" McCandles repeated over and over as his men kept straggling in and out of the room to talk about the prisoners they had taken, the guns and narcotics they had captured. "We need you, Panchita."

"I'm leaving a very fine man with you."

"Joe Handly, yes," nodded McCandles. "A fine man in anybody's show. He handled Whiskey Pete's crowd. But I still say I need you, that all of us need you, Panchita."

"No, I am through! She got up. Something in her eyes made Buck Marshall follow her out on one of the old balconies overlooking the cliffs. They stood there in the shadowed moonlight.

"If you will really stay here," he told her gravely, "it will be very, very wonderful for me, Panchita. But there's one thing." He took the enormous diamond from his breast pocket. "I don't know what in the devil to do with this thing, now that the don gave it to me."

"Sell it to some fabulously rich Far Eastern rajah." She smiled up at him. "Please don't try to keep it. Sell it, and then take the money and make Sierras de Cielo the most beautiful place in all the Southwest. But do not change it. Do not change a stone of it. Just restore, and then you will have all the beauty there is to be had." She leaned tiredly against the stone wall. "And tomorrow I will help you kill off the great bats." She looked at him as if half expecting him to object. "They are terrible things, flying monsters that prey on livestock and suck blood where they can find it."

"Tomorrow they go, Panchita." He caught her by the shoulders, looking down into her eyes. "Even if you had not said so, they would have gone by the board. Everything you desire shall be done—my dear!"

"We seem to agree beautifully!" Suddenly she was laughing, her hands gripping his arms. "May we always agree, Señor Buck! Once the curse of the diamond is gone there will be peace, and I love it here. I love every part of it. I believe"—and she looked up, a roguish little smile still on her face, and her eyes two black gems pooled with starshine—"I might get to where I could fall just as madly in love with Sierras de Cielo's new owner."

THE END.

THE *MESTA* AND THE MUSTANG

THE first cattlemen's association on the American continent was organized in Mexico four hundred and one years ago. Thus cowmen were the first business group in the new world to organize for mutual benefit and protection.

Within the memory of men still riding the range, the various cattlemen's association in our own West found that one of the best means of curtailing rustling, range wars, and other trouble was for the association to claim ownership of all mavericks in its jurisdiction, these mavericks to be sold and the proceeds divided among the members proportionately. The Mexican association had found that out centuries ago. As the Mexican association was called the *mesta,* these unbranded cattle and horses were called *mesteñas,* belonging to the *mesta.*

From *mesteñas,* we get our word "mustang," which today means those wiry little range horses that are the descendants of the wild herds that once roamed the plains.

In Texas, where there was no organized *mesta* in Spanish times, *mesteña* meant a maverick that ran with branded cattle and was claimed by their owners. Real wild cattle, and horses, too, were called *cimarrones.* The Cimarron River took its name from the vast herds of wild horses that grazed along its banks.

When English-speaking Americans settled in Texas they picked up Spanish quite rapidly, but failed to get certain fine distinctions between words. To them all wild, unbranded animals became "mustangs." Very old men still use the expression "mustang cow" for a maverick. But the name finally narrowed down to wild horses, and stuck.

THE STORY OF THE WEST

told in pictures and text by

GERARD DELANO

ANOTHER trapper, trader, scout and frontiersman famous in the annals of the Santa Fe Trail was Uncle John Smith, a pioneer of that strange and hardy breed who took to life among the Indians as if born to it.

The same year that seventeen-year-old Kit Carson made his début on the Trail, John Smith was a sixteen-year-old boy also having his first taste of wild West adventure. He had run away from St. Louis, his few belongings tied in a sack, and attached himself to a caravan then mobilizing at Council Grove.

When the party reached Bents' Fort, John wandered off with a hunting party and spent his first frontier winter among the dangerous Blackfeet, lounging about the teepees, learning Indian lore from the old chiefs or racing over the prairies with the warriors and studying their tricks with pony and weapons. In less than a year he deserted the Blackfeet for the Sioux, with whom he also lived for some time.

Finally the young white man threw in with the Cheyennes, married the daughter of the Cheyenne chief and was adopted by that tribe. He quickly attracted the attention of the important men of the tribe. Soon his deeds and wisdom earned him a place in all their councils and he became a chief himself.

As time went on, Uncle John Smith, as he was now known on the Trail, met many of the foremost frontiersmen of his time: Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, James Beckworth and others of the buckskin fraternity. Through these meetings and associations he gradually forsook his Indian life and took more to the open trail, trapping, trading, guiding.

Uncle John Smith's life was once saved by a quail, and his gratitude was everlasting. "I don't eat no quail," he'd say when offered that delicacy. "Many's the time I could have killed 'em with my quirt when all I'd had to chaw on for four, five days was the soles of a pair of old moccasins, but, boys, I don't never tech no quail."

Camped on the Trail after a season's trapping, Uncle John with two other trappers, Boyd and Thorpe, awoke one morning to see a small herd of buffalo a short distance away. The men needed meat, so they stalked the animals. Boyd and Thorpe chose a fat cow on the left and went after it.

Crawling through the tall grass, Uncle John got within easy range and took aim at the buffalo he had picked. Just then a quail flew up out of the grass and perched on his gun barrel in front of his sight. He shook the bird off and drew another bead, but before he could pull trigger there was the quail back on the barrel in the same place. Impatiently Uncle John knocked it off with his trigger hand. Then as he started to raise his gun again the shots of his two companions rang out.

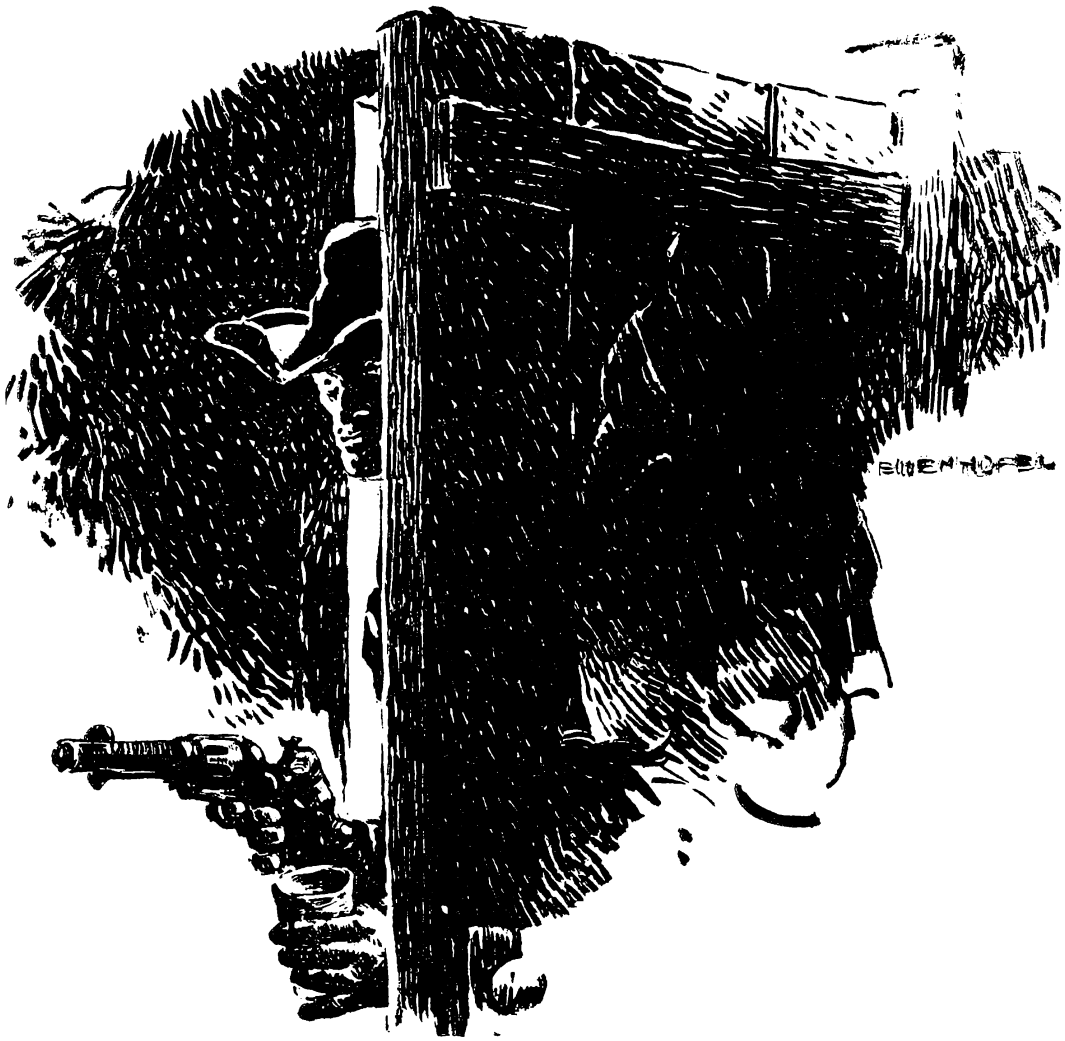
As though the gunfire had been a signal a dozen Indians dashed out of the high grass toward Boyd and Thorpe, yelling and loosing a rain of arrows as they ran. They had waited for the shots so as to catch the men with unloaded guns. Thorpe was killed instantly and Boyd was badly wounded. Uncle John sprang to the rescue and the redskins looked bewildered. They knew his rifle was loaded for they had heard only two shots.

Keeping well out of arrow range and holding the Indians at bay with his rifle, Uncle John, half carrying the wounded Boyd, made his escape. Had he been able to shoot his buffalo, neither of them would have had a chance against the redskins for there was no time to reload.

From one end of the Santa Fe Trail to the other, Uncle John Smith was known, loved and respected. Always ready and willing when a scrap with the Pawnees loomed, he accounted for many a "good Indian" and played a valiant and heroic part in helping to make the Trail safe for the covered wagons that brought courageous settlers to the Western frontier.

NEXT WEEK: KIT CARSON, INDIAN SCOUT

Uncle John Smith's bravery and wisdom earned him a place in the Cheyennes' councils and soon he himself was made a chief.



LUCK OF THE McRORIES

by JOHN COLOHAN

HOURS of blinding heat lay behind them when the posse pulled up in the shadow of Sinbad Canyon's towering walls to consider ways and means. They had ridden at headlong speed, with the memory of an old man brutally slain to spur them on, and now they had the sure knowledge that not too far ahead were the three men responsible for the deed. And they knew too, these grim-faced riders, that in the cool depths of the canyon they well might find a trap.

You had to know what had happened to understand the temper of these men. It was crowding noon now. At daybreak this same morning three armed bandits had pushed their way into the Wells Fargo of-

fice in Gypsum. Rube Squires, escaped convict, wanted man, killer, and leader of the trio, had commanded Lige Borden, the agent, to open the big iron safe. When Borden refused the outlaw had laid him flat with the barrel of a Colt and then, standing over the old man's unconscious figure, he had pumped lead into him until the smoking gun was empty. Lige Borden's horrified wife had had to watch the whole thing through, had seen the three men gallop out of town.

Now a sheriff's posse was pounding on the killer's trail. It was a time for sober judgment, but it happened that red-headed Dan McRorie was somewhat short on judgment this particular morning. Old Lige Borden had been a very close friend of his.

"Damn it to hell, Bart!" Dan cried angrily. "With all this talk you're turning this hunt into a maypole dance. If I was sheriff—"

"I know," Sheriff Bart McRorie broke in curtly. "You'd ride through Sinbad hell-for-breakfast. Maybe you'd lose two or three men but you'd get through Sinbad somehow."

"I'd get through," Dan agreed grimly. "I wouldn't hold no convention here while Squires and that pair with him ride to hell-an'-gone out of the country."

The men of the posse waited. They were used to arguments like this. The McRorie brothers never agreed on anything; they had fought ever since they were kids. Perhaps they couldn't help it, being what they were, sons of Black Dave McRorie, one of the fightingest men who ever swaggered through a tough frontier town. Black Dave was long dead now, but he had been sheriff for thirty years before he died, and his name had grown into a legend in the county.

Sheriff Bart McRorie brushed a hand through dark stubble across his cheek. He was six years older than his brother, and dark whereas young Dan was a redhead; otherwise they were much alike, big rawboned, powerfully built men, both, with high cheekbones and stubbornly slanted jaws. Bart was only thirty-one, but he had been county sheriff for eight years now.

"You'd make a grandstand play, kid," Bart said testily in answer to his brother's challenge. "You was always hell for grandstand plays anyhow."

McRorie temper boiled over in the redhead. "Grandstand play!" he snorted. "Lemme tell you something, Bart—"

"The point is," his brother interrupted, "you're not the sheriff, Dan. I'm the sheriff. You're just riding with the posse. And you're taking my orders—"

"Like hell I am!" roared Dan. He whirled his sorrel in the white dust of the road. "Rube Squires will be plumb across the river before you gents make up your minds. I'm riding back to town!"

And back to town he rode! With anger boiling and seething within him he sent his sorrel at a killing pace back along the road to Gypsum. After a mile he jerked the tired horse down, but anger stayed with him. Grandstand play, eh? He wasn't the sheriff—he was just riding with the posse. Mr. Bart McRorie was the sheriff, the high-and-mighty sheriff.

THE posse pulled into town late that night, with news that Rube Squires and his companions had given them the slip somewhere between Sinbad and the

river. Red-headed Dan McRorie offered no comment. But he nursed his anger. Not the sheriff, eh? Just a gent riding with the posse.

He still had not rid himself of a sense of resentment when next morning in the Stockman's Saloon Milt Crosby lined up at the mahogany beside him. Crosby spun a silver dollar on the bar.

"I'll buy this round, Dan," he said, beckoning to the barkeep. "I hear Rube Squires made his getaway."

Dan McRorie nodded dourly. "What they tell me," he agreed.

Crosby watched the bartender pour the whiskey. A fattish man in the fifties, with a black mustache above tight lips, Milt Crosby owned the 44 outfit on the West End. It was a big outfit, and Crosby was a man of considerable weight in the community. He had once been county commissioner and he still liked to dabble in politics in the county.

"Folks are talking some," Crosby said slowly. "Seem to hold Bart sort o' to blame for Squires getting clear. That was a pretty brutal killing, Dan. With election only a month away—

"Bart's a good man," Dan McRorie cut in. "A good sheriff."

"Sure." Crosby downed his drink. "I'd like to have a little talk with you. Let's go where we won't be bothered."

"What kind of talk?" Dan asked skeptically.

Crosby gestured toward the rear of the saloon. "Let's go back in Sam's office. I'll tell you all about it."

They went back to the empty office. Crosby laid a bottle and glasses on the table and poured a round of drinks.

"No need beating around the bush, Dan," he declared briskly. Election's coming on, and some of us have been talking about a clean-up down at the courthouse. We're trying to get a list of candidates together, men we figure ought to have a chance. Your name came up."

Dan stared at him with a puzzled frown. "Me?" Where do I fit in?"

"Sheriff," Crosby explained. He watched the younger man. "We were sort o' figuring to run you for sheriff, Dan. Again' Bart."

"Run *me* for sheriff!" Dan McRorie said.

And then, all at once, he thought of Bart's words of yesterday—the words that were still sticking in his craw. *"You're not the sheriff,"* Bart had said. *"I'm the sheriff. You're just a gent riding with the posse."*

"You see," Crosby was explaining, "your dad left quite a rep in these parts, so that it's pretty damn hard to beat a gent named McRorie, no matter what he's running for. That's the thing that's kept Bart wearing the badge ever since he was a kid. With you running agin' him we figure it ought to split the sentimental vote. It's your chance to cash in, Dan."

But young Dan McRorie wasn't thinking particularly about cashing in on his name. He was thinking that it would be kind of funny if he could beat Bart out of that sheriffing job. Maybe Bart wouldn't be so high and mighty then.

And suddenly red-headed Dan McRorie grinned. "I'm your man, Crosby," he declared. "We'll give them a run for it."

That was how it started. That was how it happened that the two sons of old Black Dave McRorie found themselves lined up on opposite sides in a fierce political contest. The bitterness might have vanished overnight had Dan's anger been allowed to evaporate, but Milt Crosby was too shrewd and too wise in the ways of politics to permit that to happen. Black Dave McRorie had left behind a name that carried a magic charm and the Crosby crowd were quite aware of its value at the top of a political slate.

So they kept the feud between the brothers burning brightly. It was not difficult; a few words here and there sufficed. Bart and Dan McRorie had been fighting over one thing or another ever since they had been kids, and now it was no trick at all to fan their political rivalry into white heat.

"I hear," Milt Crosby remarked. one evening, "that Bart says you'll make a good grandstand sheriff, Dan. He claims you rode out on the posse that day they was chasing Rube Squires and that you're likely to pull the same stunt again if you're elected sheriff."

Color flowed up into Dan's face the way it always did when he was angry. "Bart said that?"

Milt Crosby was nothing if not cautious. "I didn't hear him say it myself, but that's the way the yarn was told to me."

Dan brought a fist down hard on the top of a green card table. "I'm not a talking man," said Dan, and his voice was choked with anger. "If I was I might send word back that if I was leading a posse after a gent I wouldn't pull up in the road to hold an old woman's meeting. I'd keep on and wouldn't stop until I got him."

He rolled a cigarette in angry jerks. "I'd tell him," he added, "that when I'm sheriff of Gypsum County no man like Rube Squires will ever make a fool out o' me! No, sir!"

The word traveled back to Bart McRorie; Milt Crosby took care of that. More talk was tossed back and forth, and soon Bart and Dan were taking opposite sides of the street, not speaking when they passed each other. And presently, with election two weeks away, with Gypsum County caught up in the hottest political fight in twenty years big red-headed Dan McRorie knew he had to beat his brother, Bart, out of that sheriffing job. He had to win the sheriff's badge if it was the last thing he did in life.

DAN ran a small cow outfit in Payne Canyon. It wasn't much of a place but it was just about right for one man to handle, and it had always suited Dan. Only, after his dip into politics, he had little time for ranch work. His days were spent campaigning, shaking hands, buying cigars and drinks for prospective voters. The outfit was left to run itself.

But, as it happened, Dan was at the ranch that morning when long Jim Fergus of the Double O came riding down the road to rein his bronc down before Dan's gate. Long Jim reached into a pocket of his Levis and fished out a dirty envelope.

"Letter for you, Dan," he said. "I meet one o' José Trujillo's kids three or four miles down the road. He was walking, said his horse went lame. He had a letter for you; asked me to deliver it."

Fergus sent an envelope sailing

through the air to land in dust at Dan's feet. He lifted a gloved hand in farewell. "Gotta be riding Dan. I got a whole lot o' ground to cover today."

Dan picked the letter up from the dust. Sealed, it bore no address. He ran a knife blade through the flap of the envelope and drew forth a dirty sheet of paper. A painfully scrawled message leaped out at him:

SHERIFF MCRORIE:

If you want to catch Rube Squires I can tell you how. I do not come into town because I do not want Rube Squires to know but if you will ride to Soldier's Rock I will tell you what must be done.

A FRIEND.

Dan stared at this cryptic message for several moments. It had been meant for Bart, not for him. And Bart would want to see it, because he had been hot on the trail of Rube Squires ever since Lige Borden had been killed.

Of course, the message might be a fake. Then again it might be genuine; it might be that the man who had written it had information regarding the badly wanted desperado. And then another thought came to Dan. If this message was on the level, and if Bart should capture Rube Squires, it would very probably be the deciding factor in the race for the sheriff's badge. An admiring public would be certain to keep Bart in office if he captured the notorious killer.

But suppose he, Dan, was the one to make the capture?

It was nine o'clock in the morning, and a ten-mile ride to Soldier's Rock. Dan went out to the pasture, caught up his sorrel horse, and turned him across the plain. The sun was climbing high in a cloudless sky when Dan halted his horse in the shadow of the great upended chunk of granite that was Soldier's Rock. A moment later a small man in Levis, with rat eyes in a thin, dark face, came around the rock to meet him. Dan had never seen the man before, he was sure of that.

"You are—the shereef?" the dark man asked dubiously.

"I'm McRorie," Dan answered. "Are you the gent who sent the note?"

"Si, señor. Me, I am Pedro Martinez. I work with the sheep for Orrin Tucker, beyond the mountain."

"That note said something about Rube Squires, said you knew where he was hanging out?"

"Yes. He is the bad one, Rube Squires. So I thought perhaps if I told where he could be found you would divide some small part of the reward with Pedro Martinez. There is a reward for him, is there not?"

"Twenty-five hundred dollars, dead or alive," said Dan.

"Only," Martinez explained, "I was afraid to come into town, afraid Rube Squires might hear I had betrayed him. He is a dangerous man, señor. That is why I asked you to meet me here, so far away, so nobody could overhear me."

"That's fine," Dan said impatiently. "Let's get on with it. What about Squires?"

"He is wounded, señor, and he is alone. That I know. It weel be easy to capture him."

"Where is he?"

"You know the house of Pete Solo? What they call Robber's Roost?"

McRorie nodded. Fat Pete Solo had a cabin high in the La Salles, on the mountain trail toward the

desert. The place bore an evil name, and reputation. It was whispered that more than one man wanted by the law had found sanctuary there. Dan McRorie studied the beady-eyed little Mexican, and wondered about that.

"You're sure of this?"

"Si, señor. Last night I am sitting on the porch talking to Pete. A man rides up, and when I see his face I know it is Rube Squires. His shirt is covered with blood and he is riding all bent over in the saddle. Me, I do not say anything. So this morning Pete Solo gives me ten dollars and tells me to ride across the mountain to Apache for medicine. Instead I ride this way an' send the note to you."

"You did right," Dan assured him. "If you're telling the truth, I'll sure see you cut in for a share of the reward."

In ten days more, he thought exultantly if this little Mexican was telling the truth, he, Dan McRorie, would be elected sheriff of Gypsum County. He was pretty sure of that. That was if everything went all right.

Martinez was staring up at him. "You are going after him, shereef, alone?"

"Yeah," said Dan, "I'm going after him alone." He nodded and pointed his sorrel toward the ragged rim of the mountain wall.

After Dan was gone Pedro Martinez, his beady eyes sparkling as if with satisfaction, brought a pinto horse from behind the towering shaft of Soldier's Rock. In a saddlebag the Mexican found a bottle of whiskey, still three-quarters full. For a long moment he watched the departing rider stir dust across the level plain, and then he lifted the bottle to his lips.

NEAR dusk Dan tied his horse in a grove of cedars just below the rim of the ragged mountain crest. Traveling carefully and avoiding trails, it had taken him hours to reach this spot, but now, below him in the center of a tiny piece of cleared ground, he could see smoke rising from the chimney of fat Pete Solo's cabin. In that cabin, if Pedro Martinez had spoken the truth, lay a wounded, badly wanted desperado.

Dan rolled a cigarette, considering how to go about the business at hand. Rube Squires was poison. There was snake blood in the outlaw, and wounded he would be even more dangerous than before, for he would be desperate. At last Dan tossed the cigarette away and started down the hillside, holding carefully to the shelter of the trees.

Long minutes later he pulled up against a lean-to stable no more than fifty feet from the back door of the cabin. He was confident that he had negotiated this much of a dangerous trip without discovery. Crouching in shadows, he scanned a lighted square of window in what he knew must be the kitchen of the cabin. Even as he watched, the kitchen door opened wide and he saw the huge, flabby frame of big Pete Solo emerge with a bucket in his hand.

The fat man came unsuspectingly out into the yard. Pressed back in the close gloom of the stable, Dan waited until Solo was no more than twenty feet away. Then with the man's broad back toward him, Dan called softly:

"Solo."

The fat man turned and saw Dan's gun gleaming in the fading light. He stood fast, a monstrous, grotesque chunk of a man braced on huge legs. "What is it?" he de-

manded in a wheezy voice that was filled with surprise.

"Walk this way," Dan said quietly. "Easylike. Make one little sound and you're beef."

Solo walked forward slowly, reluctantly. Dan herded him inside the stable, shoved a gun against his chest.

"I'm looking for Rube Squires," he said bluntly.

Solo's jaw dropped. "I don't know what you're talking about."

In the gloom Dan could see Solo's face only dimly, but the fat man's voice was a give-away. "Don't lie to me," Dan said, and thumbed his gun-hammer back with a little click. "This is business, Solo. Rube Squires is in your shack."

The cocked gun did the trick. "Don't blame me," cried Solo in a scared whine. "I dunno how you knew, but Squires is bedded down in the front room. He's wounded."

"He alone?"

"Alone," Pete Solo agreed, noddig his head vigorously.

Dan fanned Solo for a gun, found nothing, and then with a length of rope hanging on the stable wall he deftly trussed the fat man hand and foot. Then he stared down at the hogtied man.

"Play dead till I come back," he warned, fingering his gun meaningly.

He picked up the bucket Solo had brought and went toward the cabin. Through the open door he could see into a lighted, empty kitchen. He went inside and put the bucket down. A lamp was burning on an oilcloth-covered table in the center of a dirty, littered room. For a moment Dan rattled pans on the stove. Suddenly a harsh voice lifted from somewhere in the front part of the house.

"Pete!"

Dan tried to match Solo's wheezy voice. "What?"

Silence. He wondered if the man in front had detected the difference in the tone—the man who must be the wounded desperado, Rube Squires. But the voice came again, querulously. "When in hell you going to bring that glass of water?"

Dan found a glass, but no water. Perhaps he wouldn't need water. He shook his Colt from holster and, holding the empty glass before him, he started toward the voice. The lamp on the kitchen table laid a lane of light across a big, empty hallway, and ahead of him Dan saw a door ajar. Glass in one hand, gun in the other, he approached the door. He pushed through into an unlighted room. Dimly he could make out a figure sprawled in a rumpled bed. In the darkness he couldn't see much else.

"You took your time, didn't you?" the man in bed grumbled.

DAN moved closer to the bed. "Yeah," he said, and brought his gun up into sight. "You take your time now, Squires, because I got you covered. Don't try to bring those mitts up from the bedclothes. Don't try anything at all."

Rube Squires would have a gun beneath the bedclothes, Dan was pretty sure of that. He went forward fast to shove his Colt in Squires' face.

"Bring your hands up," he ordered. "Easy now."

The hands came up, empty. McRorie pulled the bedclothes back. Even in the darkness, he could see the gun there, shining dimly. He took the gun, dropped it on the floor and kicked it under the bed. Rube Squires' face was just a blur

against the whiteness of a pillow. Dan flicked a match into flame.

"This is tough on you, Squires," he said.

In the glare of the match flame gittering eyes in a bony face stared up at him. The man was Rube Squires, all right.

"Yeah," Squires agreed meekly. "This is tough."

But there was something wrong. That desperado sprawled in bed should have been surprised, or angry, or frightened. He wasn't. There was something funny in his voice, but it wasn't fear. To red-headed Dan McRorie it sounded a bit like amusement.

Then, suddenly, Dan understood. He saw nothing, heard no sound, but was conscious of something hard pressing solidly against his back. He knew what it was even before the harsh voice spoke behind him.

"This is a shotgun, McRorie," the voice growled. "Let your gun drop!"

Then it was that Dan McRorie knew he had stepped trustingly into a trap. As the match flame flickered out, he saw the wolfish grin creasing Rube Squires' gaunt face, and he knew that all of this was just a trap. It had been meant for his brother, Bart, but he had walked into it.

The gun behind him prodded. "Drop your six-gun, McRorie. I got a nervous finger."

A shotgun shoved against his back. Not much choice there. Dan let the Colt slip from his hand. It clattered on the floor, and Rube Squires flung covers back and sat up straight in bed. The outlaw's voice rang out exultantly.

"You poor damn fool, McRorie! We watched you sneaking up the hill all afternoon. You fell for it!"

Squires struck a match and touched flame to the wick of an oil lamp on a battered table. He was sitting up in bed, fully clothed. He wasn't wounded; there was no sign on him of blood or wound. But then, Dan thought numbly, that story about a wound was just bait for the trap.

Rube Squires' hatchet face was savage in the lamplight as he peered at Dan. And then his jaw dropped. "Hell, Ute," he rasped. "This ain't the sheriff! This is the other one—the kid!"

Dan grinned, though he didn't feel much like grinning. "Sure," he said. "You didn't think Bart would ever step into anything like this? Did you now, Rube?"

The note had been meant for Bart, and this trap had been baited for him. Dan knew that now. But he had got the note instead of his brother, and he had tried to outsmart Bart, and so he had stepped into the trap. And that part was all right, because, if anybody had to take it, it was better him than Bart. Bart had a wife and a kid.

Only Bart would never have stepped into it; Bart had brains. He would have figured the thing for a frame-up from the start. He'd have listened to Pedro Martinez's story, and then he'd have gone back to town and picked up a posse. He wouldn't have tried to make a grandstand play alone.

Rube Squires' beady eyes had taken on a cold, calculating look. "You know, kid, I got a grudge agin' the whole McRorie tribe," he taunted. "It was Black Dave McRorie shipped me off to prison twelve years ago. I always swore I'd pay him up some day. He died too soon, so then I laid for his kid—the kid that wore his badge. And you come blundering along instead."

But Dan was hardly listening. Anger was stirring through him

again, engulfing him. That mean-faced killer on the bed had stood over old Lige Borden and emptied a gun into his body. And he'd baited a trap for Sheriff Bart McRorie, a trap that he, Dan McRorie, had walked into blindly like some inexperienced pilgrim! His anger made him want to hurl himself at the gloating face of Rube Squires.

But the shotgun was boring with unmistakable emphasis. He had not turned his head; he had not yet caught so much as a glimpse of the man called Ute.

But he knew the man was there, shoving a loaded shotgun against his back. And you couldn't beat a shotgun.

A wolfish grin was twisting the outlaw's thin lips. "You was going to collect bounty money on Rube Squires, eh? You was going to make a grandstand play—"

RUBE SQUIRES couldn't know, couldn't have the faintest idea that he was probing an old wound now, that his words brought back to the cornered redhead the memory of another day—of heat and dust, and a posse of grim-faced men, and an argument between hot-tempered Dan McRorie and his brother.

"Grandstand play, eh?" Dan McRorie muttered.

And rage rolled over him, choking his voice, smothering his judgment. Cold reason told him that he couldn't beat that shotgun at his back, but wrath had submerged reason. Else Dan McRorie would never have tried the thing he did, for no man of reason would try to spin away from a loaded shotgun at his back.

Dan McRorie tried it—tried it, and made it work. He spun fast on a boot heel, and, spinning, his arm jolted back in a piston thrust to knock the barrel out of line just as the shotgun roared. Luck was riding with him then, but even at that it was so close that he felt the tug of buckshot on his shirt, and the heat of the shotgun blast was like flame against his side.

It made a change in the shape of events in that littered room. Dan McRorie had one hand on the shotgun barrel, and the man, Ute, small, scar-faced and snarling, was trying to wrest the weapon away from him. But Dan put an end to that abruptly by jerking the little outlaw toward him and meeting the man halfway with a crashing blow to the jaw that buckled Ute's legs under him and sent him toppling to the floor. And then Dan McRorie had the shotgun.

But Rube Squires was in it now. Rube Squires, paralyzed for an instant by the swift flow of events, had leaped from the bed, tugging at a hidden gun. The gun came out fast; it made an arc of gleaming metal in the lamplight, roaring once. But Dan McRorie, a man gone berserk, was charging in wildly, swinging the shotgun by the barrel. Squires' bullet missed and the outlaw didn't draw a second chance. The redhead was using the shotgun like a club. One flailing stroke knocked Rube Squires' Colt from his hand, and a second swinging blow smashed against the gaunt man's head and knocked him clear across the room.

And that was all. Rube Squires was sprawled on his face, out cold. Ute was on his knees, still dazed by the blow which had knocked him down. Dan stooped and swept his own six-gun from the floor and turned it on the little outlaw.

"That's all, my friend," Dan said. "The ball is over."

Five minutes later he was completely master of the situation, with the two outlaws bound and helpless on the floor. Standing in the center of the room, waiting for Rube Squires to recover consciousness, he heard the faint, far-off pound of hoofs. Someone was racing toward the cabin at breakneck speed.

Leaving the lamp burning in the front room, Dan slipped outside the cabin. Light through the open door flowed out across the yard. Dan took up his position in the darkness beside the porch. Standing there, he watched a lone rider swing out of darkness to jerk his horse down in the yard and start toward the cabin on a run. For an instant the man's figure was caught in light, and in that instant Dan McRorie recognized the man.

It was Sheriff Bart McRorie, gun in hand!

The redhead stepped out of darkness. "Looking for something, Bart?" he called.

Bart McRorie whirled, gun lifting. "Dan!" he cried.

"Me," Dan McRorie said. "What brought you this way, Bart?"

"I was looking for you, kid," his brother explained. "I heard Rube Squires had you trapped. I tried to get here in time."

Dan McRorie grinned. "Rube and another gent are inside, neatly done up in hemp." He went toward his brother. "How come you heard about it, Bart?"

"A Mex named Martinez got drunk at José Trujillo's place today," Bart said slowly. He still seemed surprised. "He'd borrowed one of José's kids to carry a message to me. Afterward he got drunk an' told José it was a frame-up rigged by Rube Squires. José is a pretty good friend of mine, so he rode over to tell me. I went out and shoved a gun in this Martinez gent's teeth, and then I found out that you'd got the message instead of me, and that you'd started this way. I knew it was a trap."

Dan stared at his brother. "Wasn't that sort o' dumb, Bart? I mean, riding this way alone? You might damn well have stepped into a trap yourself."

Bart shrugged. "I sent José in to town for help. I came on ahead. I was—sort o' worried about you, kid."

"I see," said Dan.

THEY went inside. Bart looked at the outlaws, bound and helpless on the floor. He shook his head, a slow grin spreading across his face. "You beat me, kid," he said. "You ride into a trap, and you ride out again with two of the toughest jaspers in this country snarled in rope. I reckon it's McRorie luck."

"Yeah . . . . luck," Dan agreed.

And that was what it was. He saw it now. Blind luck. No brains; no courage, even. If he'd had brains he'd never have walked open-eyed into such a trap, and courage wasn't a part of it because he hadn't even considered the risk. It had been nothing else but blind, damn-fool luck.

"You're the next sheriff of Gypsum County, kid," Bart continued. "You'll be a cinch for the job when folks hear about this caper."

And, strangely, there was no envy in his voice. No regret. He seemed to be tickled by this thing his kid brother had done, seemed to be proud of it, even though it would probably mean for him the loss of the sheriff's badge.

And then, quite suddenly, Dan McRorie wasn't proud at all. He

felt low-down and mean and ashamed. Because of this affair tonight, very likely he'd be the next sheriff of Gypsum County. Once it became known that, single-handed, he'd captured Rube Squires and one of Rube's men he'd be a hero and a cinch to beat Bart in the election. And he didn't deserve it all. He didn't have Bart's brains and he didn't have Bart's savvy. But a grandstand play had panned out.

Bart lifted his head. "Sounds like horses."

They listened, and in the still night air they could hear the sound of horses traveling fast.

"Reckon that'll be the boys now," Bart said.

Dan nodded, then moved toward the door. "I forgot. Pete Solo's still hogtied out in the stable. I'll bring him in.

He went out to the stable. Fat Pete Solo was still there, and still hogtied. Don released the ropes around his legs, lifted him to his feet, and herded him toward the house. Inside, Bart was standing in the doorway, looking into darkness, listening to the pound of hoofbeats.

Across the room, Rube Squires was conscious now, sitting up on the floor. There was a patch of blood on the outlaw's cheek and an ugly bruise on his forehead where a shotgun stock had crashed against his head, and in his bony face his eyes were venomous with hate. Dan McRorie jerked him to his feet and shoved him into a chair. He looked at the ropes on the outlaw's wrists.

"Mebbe I better fix them ropes, Rube," he said. "Don't pay to take chances with a gent like you."

He glanced toward his brother, still standing in the doorway.

What happened then happened almost too swiftly for comprehension. For suddenly, savagely, Rube Squires lunged out with his bound hands and snatched Dan's gun. The redhead was looking toward the doorway, and the move caught him flat-footed. Now Rube Squires had the gun and Rube Squires was on his feet. His wrists were bound and his feet were hobbled, but he had a black gun in his hand. And he had the drop.

"Damn you!" Rube Squires snarled. "Get your hands up—both of you!"

Hands lifting slowly, Dan went back before the menace of that swinging gun. Bart had turned in the doorway, and the gun in Squires' hand shifted to cover the sheriff.

"You, too, sheriff!" Squires rasped. His gaunt, beard-stubbled face was murderous. "Get your hands high!"

But Sheriff Bart McRorie's hands didn't go up. They went down instead. They went down, and one hand came up again, and a gun showed in the hand, a gun that came out of nowhere in a move incredibly fast. A gun that roared once, and again.

And blood blotted out the snarl across Rube Squires' wolfish face as an unfired gun slipped from his grasp, and his gaunt frame seemed to break at knees and waist and neck all at once. Then Rube Squires was slumped on the floor. Dan knew that he was dead.

The redhead went forward slowly, picking up the gun the outlaw had snatched from him. He looked at the gun, and then he looked at big Bart McRorie. He seemed dazed. "He grabbed my gun, Bart. He grabbed it right out o' my hand!"

There was confusion beyond the open cabin door where steps sounded on the porch, and then

pudgy Andy Melrose, deputy sheriff, shoved a freckled face into the room. Men were crowding in behind him. But Dan was still staring at his brother.

"You saved my bacon then, Bart. Sure as hell you did!"

"Forget it," said Bart McRorie.

BUT Dan didn't forget it. He made sure that the men of the posse knew exactly what had happened. He was pretty disgusted with himself. "Of all the damn-fool tricks," he said. "And me, I wanted to be sheriff."

Andy Melrose grinned at him. "Changed your mind, Dan?"

"I'm withdrawing," Dan declared. "Any man that ain't got sense enough to keep a gun out o' an outlaw's reach ain't got sense enough to be a sheriff. If it hadn't been for Bart—"

He shook his head and let it go, but he didn't change his mind. Even when Bart tried to argue with him, on the road back to town, the redhead remained firm in his determination to pull out of the race the first thing in the morning.

"I wouldn't have no chance, anyhow," he said dolefully. "After folks hear what happened tonight."

He quit the posse at his ranch, seeing no need to ride farther. Inside his cabin he lit a lamp in the kitchen and stirred a fire in the range. He put water on to boil for coffee. He had eaten nothing since early morning.

He dropped wearily into a chair, waiting for the water to boil. Sitting there, he took his gun out of holster. He broke the gun and looked at it thoughtfully. The cylinder was empty; the gun was unloaded. He wasn't surprised at that, because he had unloaded the gun himself. He had kicked the shells out of the cylinder just before he brought fat Pete Solo from the stable to the house. Just before Rube Squires had snatched the gun from his hand.

Bart wouldn't like it if he knew that he'd killed an unarmed man tonight, a man who unknowingly had been brandishing an empty gun. Bart wouldn't like it at all, even though the man he'd killed had been a cold-blooded murderer who had once stood over an old man and emptied a smoking gun into his body. Bart was funny about things like that.

But there was one thing sure, Dan McRorie thought. Old Bart was pretty likely to be sheriff of Gypsum County for some time to come.

THE END.

"I TALKED WITH GOD"

and, as a result of that little talk with God some ten years ago, a strange new Power came into my life. After 43 years of horrible, sickening, dismal failure, this strange Power brought to me a sense of overwhelming victory, and I have been overcoming every undesirable condition of my life ever since. What a change it was. Now—I have credit at more than one bank, I own a beautiful home, drive a lovely car, own a newspaper and a large office building, and my wife and family are amply provided for after I leave for shores unknown. In addition to these material benefits, I have a sweet peace in my life. I am happy as happy can be. No circumstance ever upsets me, for I have learned how to draw upon the invisible God-Law, under any and all circumstances.

You too may find and use the same staggering Power of the God-Law that I use. It can bring to you too, whatever things are right and proper for you to have. Do you believe this? It won't cost much to find out—just a penny post-card or a letter, addressed to Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. S.S., Moscow, Idaho, will bring you the story of the most fascinating success of the century. And the same Power I use is here for your use too. I'll be glad to tell you about it. All information about this experience will be sent you free, of course. The address again—Dr. Frank B. Robinson, Dept. S.S., Moscow, Idaho. Advt. Copyright 1939 Frank B. Robinson.

GREAT CATTLE RANCHES

The Hillman Ranch

by CHARLES L. McNICHOLS

THE Rancho Estrella, now called the Hillman Ranch, is located about twelve miles east of Paso Robles, California.

It has been a cattle spread for nearly a hundred and forty years, being, like all the older California ranches, an original Spanish grant. The headquarters house, with the original beams and walls intact, is a hundred and thirty years old. It is such a good example of the early California adobe ranchhouses that it is often visited by historians, architects, and such, making examinations and taking pictures. The old spring out in front is just the same as it was when the first Spanish owner developed the water.

A whole lot of the fifty thousand

acres of rolling range are just like they were then, too, although there is some plowland around the edges that has been leased out to farmers during these last few years.

The two thousand cows that now range over those hills are a lot different from the cattle of a hundred years ago. Now when beef demands a good price and people expect choice, tender cuts for their money, it is quality rather than quantity that counts. The range is stocked with low hung, blocky, well-bred Herefords now, instead of wild Mexican cattle, long on legs and horns and short on beef.

In the early days the Estrella range carried from two to five times as many cattle as it does now, because people weren't as particular about quality. In years of good rainfall, when the grass grew tall and green, the cattle prospered and put on fat. Then there was a big *mantanza* (slaughtering). The saleable products of a cow at that time were its tallow and hide. Meat just didn't matter.

At the time of the *mantanza* all the Indians from miles around assembled to help with the skinning and to strip the tallow and render it out in big iron kettles and brick vats. The tallow was poured into rawhide receptacles and hauled to the ranchhouse. The hides were sun-dried until they were as stiff as boards and then they were stacked up like so much lumber.

As for meat, the Indians ate all they could stuff down and more provident ones jerked (sun-dried) all they could carry to their villages. That was the pay they received for their help. The ranch took little or none of the meat because one steer was killed daily for ranch use. Most of the carcass of each steer was left lying right where the hide and tallow had been stripped from it. It's easy to understand why the *mantanza* ground was generally a flat spot ten or twelve miles from the ranchhouse!

When the Indians left, the grizzlies came. Sometimes the bears didn't wait until the slaughtering was over and once in a while an Indian would get badly mauled by a hungry bear. Usually the bears were kept off by fires, the shouting and singing of the Indians and *vaqueros*, and an occasional shot that was fired into the air. If they got too bad, the boldest of them would be roped or killed by the *vaqueros'* long lances. Hardly anyone in old California dared to hunt bear with a gun, because, with the exception of a few firearms brought in by visiting Americans, guns were old smooth-bores and almost as poor as the powder that was shot in them.

After the Indians were gone, the *mantanza* ground literally swarmed with big grizzlies. As many as fifty bears were once seen feating on the *mantanza* of another ranch, a few miles north of the Hillman spread. With the bears came the big California condors to share the feast, and the coyotes were on hand too. Now the grizzlies are all gone. American rifles made short work of them. The condors have been reduced to a few individuals far back in the Santa Barbara mountains. But the coyotes have thriven and multiplied. There are more coyotes in California right now, than there were in Spanish times!

As soon as the summer sun baked the ground good and hard, the *vaqueros* loaded the tallow boxes and the hides in solid-wheeled ox carts, and hauled them over the coast range to Morro

Bay where they were sold or traded to Yankee ship captains. The trip took two days, and from four to six weeks of leisurely hauling was needed to get all the year's "crop" of grease and "California bank notes" —the stiff board-like hides—over to the coast.

There was only a slight effort made to limit the cattle to the number the range could safely carry because if a bad year came along and cattle died from lack of grass, their hides were still good. The only loss was a few pounds of tallow!

That is why there were a lot more cattle on the Rancho Estrella in those free-and-easy days. But a single, stocky, bald-face yearling of the present crop is worth more in money value than a hundred of the long, stringy old-timers.

The Rancho Estrella passed through many hands before the Hillman family bought it in 1912. It has had a colorful history. Once, a long time ago when land was cheap and men were pretty careless with it, the whole ranch—land, cows, horses and the dozen or more *vaqueros* and their families who were as much a part of the place as the grass and the big oak trees—was lost in a poker game.

In spite of changing times and improvement in ranching methods, much of the old color remain and some old customs still persist.

For instance, Wayne Hillman, the present owner of the Hillman Ranch, still keeps the old traditional date for the spring roundup—April 15th. And this is not just a cow-gathering, it's a fiesta, a gala time of the year. All the neighbors come in from the surrounding ranches to help celebrate. They, in turn hold their rodeos on different days, conveniently spaced so everybody can have a round of entertainment in the spring just as they had in the days long gone.

THE END.

SADDLE SAVVY

By MOJAVE LLOYD

OLD Josh Halliwell thought he had locked the door. But he hadn't for he glanced up to see a lot of meanness looking at him out of one glittering eye. The stranger's other eye was concealed by a black velvet patch secured by a shoestring around his head. He was tall and lean, looked tough as rawhide and as though he would be very fast on his feet. Old Josh quickly sized him up as too flashily dressed to be a working cowhand. The soft buckskin gauntlets with white beadwork on the cuffs had never been scarred by a rope. When he spoke, his gritty voice matched the sinister expression in his hard black eye.

"You the saddlemaker?" he sneered.

Old Halliwell nodded. "I have been the saddlemaker here in Claybank," he said proudly, "for nigh unto forty years."

The stranger dropped his ornate saddle on the floor. "Put new stirrup straps on this old Brazos," he snapped. "Now!"

It was seven-thirty of a sultry August evening. Old Josh Halliwell was perched cross-legged on his workbench, busily stitching on a black saddle skirt by the light of a candle stub stuck in a whiskey bottle. It had been his habit now, for a year past, to return to his tiny shop after supper and work for an hour or so on the task that was the light of his life—the creation of a masterpiece of the saddlemaker's art, a magnificent saddle to be presented as a personal tribute to his boyhood chum, now governor of the State of Texas. It was a sacred task.

He caught the stranger's hard eye resting covetously on his beautiful silver-inlaid, hand-tooled saddle. It sent cold shivers down his bent old spine. Never before had he been surprised with that saddle exposed to view. Its very existence was a secret he hugged to his heart.

Josh shook his head slowly. "Not till morning," he said in his gentle way. "You see, my friend, I have my own evening work."

The tall stranger reached over, grasped Halliwell by the nape of the neck and yanked him off the workbench. Then he back-handed him across the mouth, spilling him on his back in a pile of work harness. "I said *now!*" he rasped.

The oldster got groggily to his feet and batted some of the dust and leather clippings off his patched levis. Blood was dribbling from his lips into his scraggly gray beard. He wiped it on the backs of his wrinkled old hands. His breath came jerkily but he looked mildly out of kindly blue eyes at the big dude.

Josh Halliwell was one of the best loved old-timers in the entire Claybank country. He was as gentle as a kitten, with a kindly word for everyone. For forty years, as he had said, he had been turning out fine saddles, slaving early and late, living alone behind his little shop. Fast failing eyesight had brought poverty. But although many would gladly have helped him, his pride forced him to decline all such offers. So long as he lived, he would ply the tools of his beloved craft.

Years before, there had been rumors that he had once been the deadliest rifle shot on the Rio Grande, and that he had once killed a man down there. But never in all the years in Claybank had anyone known him to lay hand to a gun. His one known weakness was that every Saturday evening he bought a bottle of whiskey.

"My friend," he said shakily, "why didn't you tell me it was urgent? I'll fix your saddle." He picked the ornate Brazos saddle up as though his warped old hands always respected leather, no matter who owned it, and placed it carefully on his workbench. He squinted near-sightedly at it over his iron spectacle rims.

"These stirrup straps ain't wore out," he said. "You want I should put new ones on anyhow?"

"That's what I said," the stranger sneered. "And that ain't the half of it. You're sellin' that fancy new silver-mounted to Denver Drake, best damn bronc peeler in Texas. That's me! I aim to take down first money in the rodeo here tomorrow. That saddle you're finishin' is just my style."

He had stepped over and was closely examining the magnificent work of art intended for the governor of the State. The single black eye that swung back to Halliwell gleamed with a hungry light.

"That shore will match up nice with the rest of my garb," he smirked.

With a wave of a gloved hand he indicated his own doeskin jacket, black Mexican *pantalones* with the jet buttons down the sides, dove-colored Stetson, handmade Justin boots and silver spurs with small cruel rowels. "I'll pay you two hundred dollars for the saddle," he added as an afterthought.

The aged saddler sensed that he was looking at a man as vain as a peacock, one who would probably stop at nothing to gratify his vanity. He slowly shook his grizzled head. "I wouldn't sell that piece of work for her weight in gold," he said. "That saddle goes to old Rock Dunnigan, governor of the State of Texas. Me and Rock rode the river together when we was lads."

The sinister-eyed Denver Drake didn't seem to have heard. While old Josh worked, he stepped back and forth across the shop with the lithe strides of a cougar. He twirled the ends of his long black mustaches, whistled thinly between his teeth, rolled cigarettes with a lightning motion of his gloved fingers. He talked a little of who he was and where he came from. At every turn, his gleaming black eye raked the dark square of the window and once old Josh thought he glimpsed the faint white smudge of a face out there, but he couldn't be sure.

At last Josh straightened his bent back. "There you are, my friend," he said wearily. "Them straps won't bust in a hurry."

Without the slightest warning, the big dude's right hand shot out, seized a fistful of old Josh's vest and shirt and swung the scrawny old man off the floor. The oldster saw the gloved left fist coming, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it. It landed with a sickening thud about three inches above his belt buckle. He caved in like a sack struck with a sledge hammer.

HE woke up on the harness pile again. The stranger was slopping water over his head and face. The dude jerked him to his feet and slammed him upright against his workbench.

"You goin' to sell me that saddle?" he growled.

Halliwell's wizened little old face looked like a jaundiced apple. His stomach felt as if it were tying itself in knots. He groped around till he found his spectacles. One lens was cracked, but he put them on and squinted up at the tall thug. Not a trace of fear showed in his twisted features.

"My friend," he said gently, "that saddle with the four-leaf-clover stamping is my last work in life. Nothing you can do to me matters —I'm about through anyhow. That saddle's all I care about, and it goes to the governor."

Too late he saw he had given the big ruffian an idea. The dude stepped back and flipped matched six-guns from molded holsters with a hissing sound. His hard black eye shone with a mocking light.

"Keno!" he sneered. "You sell me that kak or I'm goin' to blow it into hoggin' strings."

"Stop!" cried Halliwell, throwing his bent old body between the lined guns at his precious saddle.

His faded eyes dilated with horror. He was prepared to endure anything himself, but thought of injury to the sum of his life's work tore the very soul of him. One look into the hard eye behind those guns convinced him the big dude would do just what he threatened to do. Anything was better than the destruction of his beloved saddle—even parting with it.

"Take it!" he choked.

The big dude exposed shining white teeth in a grin as mirthless as a Texas norther. "That's better," he gritted. "Now I got to get along to the feed stable. By workin' straight through tonight, you can have that new silver-mounted of mine finished in time for the buckin' contest. You have it ready at exactly nine-thirty tomorrow mornin'." His ruthless black eye stabbed at Halliwell's faded blue. "You hear me?"

The aged saddler looked once more into that single merciless eye, glittering like a black agate, then nodded agreement.

The big dude chucked his guns back into his holsters and swept his fancy Brazos off the bench. Pivoting on his heel, he strode out and slammed the door.

Old Josh staggered across his little shop and dropped quivering into his squeaky old splint rocking chair. But in a moment he was on his feet again. An idea had struck him. He got another candle stub out of a coffee can and stuck it into a pocket of his vest. After downing a small drink of whiskey, he locked up and went hobbling at fast as he could up the back alley.

Claybank was roaring. Cowhands and miners and all the riffraff of the wild little frontier town were having a last howling fling before the rodeo the next day Brawling and gunshots sounded in saloons. The high wail of fiddles and the scuffle of dancing feet drifted out from the honkatonks. But old Josh, as he hurried along through the black darkness of the alley, scarcely noticed these things.

His mind was busy with thoughts concerning the man, Denver Drake. The dude had said he hailed from up Wyoming way. If that was true, reflected Josh, how did it happen that the horn of his Brazos saddle bore spiral rope burns, showing that it had been used, not in the north, where cowboys tied fast, but away to the southeast, where cowhands took their dallies?

And there was something else. That saddle, to Josh's knowing old hands, had far too much bulge in the skirts. Why had the dude been afraid to leave it overnight to be repaired? And why did the big thug never take his gloves off, even when rolling a quirly? The oldster shook his grizzled head and hustled along.

When he reached the rear of Dogie Martin's feed stable, he eased up to the back door and worked at it

gently till he had noiselessly slid it open half an inch, then glued an eye to the crack. He saw Dogie come from a stall where he had just tied a horse. Denver Drake was standing in the runway, holding his saddle on his left arm. His raspy voice cut through the stable.

"Feller," he said, "this here is the saddle I aim to take down first money with in the bronc peelin' tomorrow. You got a place where you can lock 'er up safe as a bank vault?"

In the dim light of the smoking lantern dangling by a wire from a beam, Josh could see the flush of anger that stained the face of the honest little feed stable man. Dogie spun on his peg leg, led the way to the door of his storeroom midway of the stable, and unlocked the padlock.

"If you got a notion this here stable is a thieves' nest, mister," he said, "toss your old hull in there. She'll keep till hell gits snowed under."

Denver hung his saddle up in the storeroom and came out. Martin snapped the padlock. Josh watched the two disappear, the big dude out the front door, Dogie into his cubbyhole of an office.

Old Halliwell backed away, slid into a narrow opening beside the stable and stole along till he reached the storeroom window. He knew Dogie's padlock was more for show than anything else, and that the window didn't even have a bar on it. Two minutes of silent effort with his heavy pocketknife and he was inside.

He lit his candle stub, set it on a box, lifted the ornate Brazos saddle down, then worked fast. Between those skirts which were too bulky —between the leather and the sheepskin lining—he found a cache. He expelled his breath with a soft hiss and hunked back on his heels.

In his hands were four packages of crackling new twenty-dollar bills! He swiftly counted one package with deft fingers. It contained fifty bills. There were four thousand dollars in those four packages.

Suddenly old Josh sensed rather than heard stealthy footsteps approaching through the stable runway. With a startled movement he slipped the packages back and snuffed the candle. But he felt in his bones it was too late.

THE padlock rattled. Halliwell dropped the saddle and scuttled toward the window. The door flew open. The old saddler was plainly revealed in the light of a lantern.

"Hold it!" barked a voice.

Old Josh stopped. His first thought was thankfulness that he had replaced the money under the saddle skirts. A man couldn't be accused of theft when he had taken nothing. He turned and shaded his eyes with an unsteady hand. Dogie Martin was standing in the doorway, balancing on his peg leg. His left hand held the lantern, his right a big Colt.

"Josh," he said, "have you commenced to walk in your sleep?"

Recalling that he had recently taken a drink of whiskey, the old man got close enough for the little hostler to smell his breath. He tried to stagger a trifle. "Dogie," he said guiltily, "I had a mite more red-eye this evenin' than usual. Reckon I was lookin' for a place to bed down."

"Josh," grunted Dogie, "I have knowed you for twenty years. As a liar, you ain't worth shucks. What *did* fetch you here?"

Old Josh looked Martin straight in the eye. "Dogie," he said

earnestly, "there is a time to talk. Are you willin' I should play my hand out?"

"Keno!" agreed the feed man. "I might mistrust many a man, Josh, but not you. I'll back your play."

They closed the window, hung the saddle up where it had been and locked the door. Halliwell let himself out the back way and Martin closed the door behind him. The oldster did his thinking while his stiff legs hobbled along.

One fixed idea kept buzzing in his gray old head. No man with four thousand dollars concealed beneath his saddle skirts had come to Claybank in search of a purse of one hundred and fifty dollars in a bronc-riding contest. So what was Drake here for? Josh pondered that as he went hobbling down the alley. And he reached a dangerous decision. He would shadow Denver Drake and try to find the answer.

And he did. For the next two hours he was a warped little shadow on the heels of a big dude and three other tough gents who joined him in the Spread-Eagle Bar. While the four ate supper in How Sing's Café, Josh waited patiently behind a cottonwood across the street, watching the seething mob that swirled and howled through the dusty thoroughfare.

In and out of saloons and honkatonks the four drifted. They drank quietly by themselves, seeming to take pains to avoid brawls and escape notice. But always, like an unseen bur in the tail of a mule, went the aged saddlemaker. And at last, along about midnight, he was rewarded.

In front of the Spread-Eagle, Denver muttered something to his companions. The four separated and drifted in different directions through the mob. Halliwell didn't hesitate. He let the other three go. It was Denver he was after.

Drake's trail was devious. It was hard work for the hobbling old man to keep track of him. But finally the big dude, after a furtive glance each way, slid sidwise into a black alley mouth.

Old Josh hesitated. Anyone turning into that black alley on the Drake tail would be clearly outlined against the garish light of the street. Even a man with a gun in his fist would be taking a long chance. Josh had nothing but his jackknife, and he wouldn't use that on a fellow man. He had a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. But in he went.

He was on his belly, as stealthily as a snake. Ahead of him he could hear the big man's soft footsteps. Then all was silence. Old Josh squirmed on. Then he heard more soft footsteps. But this time they were behind him. With the hair crawling on the back of his neck, he slid under the end of the loading platform behind Zeke Belcher's store and lay there scarcely breathing.

Those soft footfalls came straight toward him. Just when he was sure he had been seen, they passed right over him as a man mounted the steps of the platform. Other footfalls joined those. Hushed voices spoke. Then Josh heard the snap of a lock as a door of the store was pried open and after that, nothing.

Old Josh judged about five minutes passed before four men came down the steps. Even in the darkness, he could make out that two of them were carrying a small wooden box that seemed heavy. He heard Denver's harsh whisper.

"You two fellers slide back among these Mex dobes and get that stuff

cached where I said. You lose that powder and we don't blow no safe in the mornin'. That bein' the case, I'll gut-shoot the both of you. Git!"

"Dynamite!" thought Halliwell, with icy fingers running up and down his spine. And there's but the one safe in town worth the blowin' —the one in the bank."

The four had vanished and the oldster hobbled away home. When he had the doors securely locked and had tacked blankets over the windows of the shop, he went feverishly to work on his beloved saddle—but not the way Denver Drake expected him to.

It was exactly nine thirty the next morning when Drake came stomping in. Old Josh sat humped in his rocking chair, his faded eyes peering sadly over his spectacle rims at the last great masterpiece of the saddlemaker's art his shriveled old hands ever would fashion. His brooding gaze swerved to the towering figure of the big dude.

"My friend," he said dully, "I promised to sell you this saddle. All my life I've kept my promises. But into this saddle has gone a large part of my heart. Don't take it."

Denver laughed harshly. "You locoed old coot," he chuckled. "You ought to be damn glad I'm payin' for it instead of just takin' it along. But I'll stick to my side of the deal, too."

He took a cowhide wallet from his pocket and without removing his gloves thumbed ten new twenty-dollar notes from a thick wad and tossed them into the old man's lap. Picking up the new saddle, he expertly tested its weight and balance in his gloved hands. An evil smile of satisfaction played over his hard features.

"See you in hell!" he grinned, and stalked out.

The moment he disappeared, the bent old saddler underwent a transformation. He shoved out of his chair, locked the door, and hobbled back into the little rear room where he lived. Unlocking a scarred cedar chest, he lifted out a shining old Springfield rifle and turned it lovingly in his gnarled hands. New life seemed to animate his brittle old bones, a new light to shine in his faded blue eyes.

Ten minutes later he had committed a crime he fervently hoped would be atoned for by subsequent events. He too had broken into the store of his friend Zeke Belcher.

HE lay stretched on his belly in the darkened store's front window, forted up behind a huge cast-iron cookstove. In his quivering hands nestled his shining old Springfield and at his elbow lay an open box of cartridges. His bleak blue eyes peered watchfully through a two-inch crack below the window frame he had raised.

On a slight angle across the deserted street stood the Stockmen's Bank, owned by Perry Dale, Josh's friend over the long years. On the right side of the bank building, back toward the rear, a window opened on a short blind alley. From where he lay, old Josh looked straight into the blind alley. His view commanded the bank window and, opposite it, the open shed at the rear of Taggart's Hardware. Because of the rodeo it was a holiday and everything was closed. The bank's front blinds were drawn.

For a few minutes the old saddlemaker was torn by misgivings. Maybe he should have gone to the sheriff. But there was nothing much on which to appeal to the law. Then, too, he knew his old friend Tom Larraby had his hands full with the

wild rodeo crowd. Josh hated to bother him. All his life he had hated to bother folks.

He amused himself listening to a horse fly buzzing against a window-pane. In the distance he could hear the roar of the crowd up at the rodeo grounds. The only living thing left in the silent street was a liver-marked hound that got up listlessly out of the dust and crawled under Taggart's awning to escape the growing heat. It was within a minute or two of ten o'clock, when the bucking contest was scheduled to commence, that old Josh's cramped body stiffened.

Four riders racked quietly into the street from the east, as if just arriving in town. In the lead rode Denver Drake and a lathy gent on an apron-faced chestnut. Drake's black eye-patch and the lathy gent's gold teeth glistened in the sunlight. At sight of Drake riding his beloved black-and-silver saddle, old Josh's faded eyes misted. Behind the leaders rode a rat-faced little ranny and a paunchy jasper who sat his saddle like a carcass of beef. All four were double-gunned and had carbines tucked under their knees. The restless swiveling of their heads told Halliwell their alert eyes were sweeping the deserted street and closed store fronts.

When directly in front of the tense old saddlemaker, they threw a last darting glance in both directions and swung quickly into the blind alley. Jumping their horses to the alley's end, they threw themselves to the ground. The fat man grabbed the reins of all four horses and led them into the concealment of Taggart's shed. The other three worked fast.

The scrawny little rat-faced gent sprang lightly up to the sill of the bank window. Drake slipped what looked to old Josh like a short heavy crowbar from a saddle scabbard, jabbed the claw under the window frame and gave one powerful jerk. The window shot upward. Rat-face grabbed the weapon and slid it under the lowest of the iron guard bars. Skinny and the dude seized the protruding end of the crowbar. As they brought their weight down on it with a lunge, Rat-face jumped on top of it. The window bar fairly exploded out of the rotten wood.

Halliwell wondered where the box of dynamite was. Then he realized that all the powder needed to blow the lock from the ancient bank safe could easily be carried in a pocket.

While the three were slipping inside the bank, Fatty waddled over with an armful of blankets he had unstrapped from behind their saddle cantles and flung them through the window.

The scheme lay plain now to old Josh. What with the roaring of the mob and the bawling of steers up at the rodeo grounds, the light explosion required to blow the safe, muffled under close-packed wet blankets, wouldn't be heard by a soul. These four desperadoes would be halfway to the border before the robbery was even discovered. The aged saddler shook his grizzled head sadly.

Listening for it though he was, he barely felt the slight tremor that ran through Zeke Belcher's store. A stove lid rattled. Then old Josh heard a faint muffled report. After a few minutes, a wavering wisp of blue smoke drifted out the bank window, with the three thugs close behind it. Drake stopped to tie the sack he was carrying.

His three henchmen mounted and came riding slowly from the alley entrance. They reined in and

glanced back anxiously. Drake was having some difficulty strapping the sack of the loot on his saddle. He waved the others on angrily. The three swung their mounts and started out of town at a walk.

Old Josh eased the end of his rifle barrel over the sill and nursed the walnut stock affectionately against his seamed cheek. His gnarled old hands were steady now. In his faded blue eyes was a far-away expression, as if for the instant he were peering away back down the long years to far-off days of youth, when he was the deadliest rifle shot riding the border trails.

At last Drake got the sack strapped to his liking. His salty big roan was pin-wheeling. He grabbed the saddlehorn, jammed his left elbow against the nervous brute's neck and swung for the saddle. At that precise instant old Josh Halliwell fired!

DENVER DRAKE screamed hoarsely. That beautiful black saddle went to pieces as though it had exploded. Pommel and cantle flew in opposite directions. The heavy beef rawhide covering separated from the tree. The rigging rings let go, sending skirts and fenders and stirrup straps flying. Drake catapulted through the air and crashed headfirst against a shed post. The maddened roan bucked loose from the remainder of the wreckage and tore toward the street.

The other three robbers spun their mounts and dashed back. Fatty hit the alley mouth just in time to collide full tilt with the plunging roan on its way out. Fatty's mount went over backward on top of him.

Whether the lathy gent and Rat-face jumped to the conclusion that the rifle shot had come from the alley, and thought they were going to Drake's rescue, old Josh couldn't figure. Neither could he figure whether Denver Drake thought his henchmen had double-crossed him. But certain it is that as the lathy gent and Rat-face quirted their ponies into the alley, Drake rolled to a sitting position, jerked a six-gun with each hand and met them with a hail of lead.

Both went down. Their horses whirled on their cruppers and went slashing toward the rodeo grounds after the boogered roan.

Drake staggered to his feet. But Halliwell promptly cut the heel off one of his boots with a rifle shot and dumped him on the seat of his *pantalones* again. But this time Drake spotted the telltale plume of gun-smoke, shoved to his feet and sprayed the window of Belcher's store with lead. Slugs rang against the cookstove. The instant the hail stopped, old Josh bobbed his head up and cut Drake down a second time by nipping the other boot heel.

A bedlam of howls and gunshots was rising in the direction of the rodeo grounds. The gun fight had been heard. Drake twisted to his knees and started to reload his empty guns. Old Josh carefully stuck his gray head out the store window.

"My friend," he called, his cracked old voice suddenly sharp as a whiplash, "if you don't drop them hog legs, I'll send your heart chasin' them boot heels. Shuck 'em!"

When the swarm of riders from the rodeo swept down the street, Josh was reverently gathering up the pieces of his precious saddle, at the same time keeping Denver Drake under his watchful eye. Crusty old Tom Larraby, the sheriff, buck-

jumped his sorrel over the two bodies crumpled at the alley mouth and flung himself heavily from the saddle. When he saw old Josh, and the ground all covered with twenty-dollar bills, the hard glare in his gray eyes changed to an expression of blank bewilderment.

"I'll be a pink-toed prophet!" he snorted.

"Now, now, Tom!" exclaimed Josh. "Don't you go to gettin' sputtery." His calloused forefinger made a circuit taking in Denver Drake propped bleeding against a shed pole, the two men full of holes, Fatty lying dead beneath his dead horse, and the shattered bank window.

"These four hombres robbed the bank, Tom. I heard the explosion when the safe was blowed. There's the loot layin' yonder in a sack. I seen the hull thing. But I was too scairt to run for you. Now, whether these boys had some triflin' difference of opinion over the swag or somethin', I couldn't say, but you can see for yourself they sorta worked each other over."

"Get the hell out of here!" bawled Tom Larraby, driving back the mob that came crowding in. "All but you, Perry."

Perry Dale, the banker, came into the alley on tiptoe as if treading on eggs. His face was a greenish hue. His mouth hung open. He stared at old Josh, at the shattered window, then reached down and gingerly picked up one of the new twenty-dollar bills.

"Why . . . why," he croaked, they're counterfeits!"

"You know what, sheriff?" piped Halliwell, as if he had just thought of something. "I'll bet my spectacles against a pint of whiskey these four rannihans is the gang I was readin' about a month or so ago in the San Antonio paper. It said there was a gang circulating bad money all over the Southwest —a gang led by a big skunk named Brazos Bogart."

He jerked his head toward the big dude. "There sets the ramrod of this here outfit. But he calls hisself Denver Drake. He can roll smokes without takin' his gloves off."

"Uh-huh," grunted the sheriff. His shaggy eyebrows drew into a thoughtful V. "The dodger on Brazos Bogart says a Mex gal that hated him got him full of *pulque* and tattooed a snake on the back of each of his hands."

He strode over to the half-conscious brigand and yanked one glove off, then the other. On the back of each hand was a coiled serpent in bright red and green. Old Larraby jerked Drake's eye-patch off. The glittering black eye beneath it exactly matched the other one. Taking the black handlebar mustache by both ends, the sheriff gave a sharp tug. The fake mustache left the dude's upper lip as slick as a whistle.

Tom Larraby turned to a runty, freckled little fellow who pushed through the crowd wearing a deputy's star. "Here, Stub!" he grunted. "Haze this big vinegaroon up to the jail. Chain a freight wagon or a dead hoss or somethin' to one of his laigs. Brazos Bogart is the most bodaciously wanted hombre on the line."

The sheriff swung on the old saddlemaker. "Josh," he mused, "how come that kak you are gatherin' up to go all to pieces that away?"

"It was like this, Tom," said old Josh seriously. "This prize saddle I was makin' as a present for the

governor wasn't finished. I had just sorta tacked it together to see how it was goin' to look. That sinner," pointing to Bogart, "took 'er away from me by main force and awkwardness."

Brazos Bogart's glittering eyes looked daggers at the old man as he went by but Josh peered innocently at Larraby over his spectacle rims.

"I calc'late what happened was this, Tom," he went on. He held up the demolished horn of the saddle. "This here saddle was a new idea of mine. The side plates was extended forward and anchored to the root of the horn. Well, looks like somebody put a slug through this horn. And when that happened, this here saddle just naturally went to scatteration."

A shrewd expression deepened the crows's-feet around the veteran lawman's steely eyes. "What you doin' with that rifle, Josh?" he grunted. "Whose is it?"

"Tom," complained old Josh gently, "you are the askinest man! I reckon I'm entitled to this here old Springfield as a keepsake."

With the rifle stuck through a suspender, and his scrawny arms full of saddle parts, the old-timer hobbled briskly away toward his little shop.

"Josh!" the sheriff called after him. "Whenever you get fed up with makin' saddles, you come to me and swear out a deputy's star."

Old Josh Halliwell paused and looked back at the sheriff and the grinning crowd. "Tom," he said reprovingly, "you know full well I'm a peaceable man." With that he hobbled on toward his saddle shop.

THE END.

COW RANGE FOREVER

FORTY percent of the entire area of these United States, which makes up about eighty-five percent of the great West, is cow range right now, and never will be anything else. That is the official statement of the United States Department of Agriculture. Over ninety-eight percent of the land in Nevada and more than ninety percent of Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming is listed as "range, desert or mountain."

The government has now forbidden all homesteading in this area and discourages the use of all but very small sections of it, mostly those where irrigation is feasible, for anything but grazing.

The range area, instead of decreasing as many people believe, has been steadily increasing for the past ten years. The increase comes from two causes—the return of land to grass that had once been under plow and the reclamation of desert areas.

The returned plow land is made up either of abandoned homesteads or of submarginal farms in private ownership that the government bought up, all land where the nester makes one good crop in a wet year and then starves for five dry ones.

The "reclamation" of desert into range consists chiefly in the establishment of waterholes and tanks. Most of the so-called desert areas in the United States grow enough feed to furnish grazing for one cow to twenty or thirty acres, but vast stretches have been without natural water, and as a cow must drink once a day to keep contented, range more than six miles from water is useless.

Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

SO you like to tinker with guns? Annually hundreds of our good friends write in inquiring about some ideas they have for rebuilding, remodeling, altering, or otherwise changing some standard gun, either old or new, more properly to meet their ideas of what it should be.

There is a lot of sport in this for the chap who likes to tinker and, within reasonable limits, it is perfectly safe. But certain things should not be done.

Every once in a while someone writes in and indicates that he wishes to grind or file out certain identification on his gun. He may have a regular Springfield barrel and receiver, for instance, and desires to make a sporting rifle out of this weapon. He doesn't like all of the decorations stamped across the front end of the receiver which states: "U. S. Springfield Armory, Model 1903, No. 1276128." He wants to know how he can remove all of this data without spoiling the appearance of the gun.

We could give plenty of information as to how this may be done, but it isn't legal.

The Federal Firearms Act of 1938 states, in part, that it is unlawful for any person to "transport, ship, or knowingly receive in interstate or foreign commerce any firearm from which the manufacturer's serial number has been removed, obliterated or altered, and the possession of any such firearms will be presumptive evidence that such firearms was transported, shipped or received, as the case may be, by the possessor in violation of this Act."

Therefore you might run afoul of the law if you handle doctored guns. In purchasing any firearm, do not accept it if the serial number has been removed or tampered with. If you have already paid for it, immediately upon receipt communicate with your local police authorities and

FREE LITERATURE

"Straight Shooting"—16 pages of instructions 3c
Western Ammunition Handbook—72 pages 5c
Winchester Ammunition Handbook—44 pages 3c
Three-pound bundle assorted catalogs—East of Chicago 30c
West of Chicago 40c

Stamps are accepted. Inclose extra stamp if your letter requires a reply.

they will help you get your money back. Unfortunately, you cannot legally ship that gun back to whoever offered it to you for sale and it must, according to law, be confiscated and destroyed.

This law was aimed at criminals and not at the average home tinkerer, yet it, nevertheless, affects him. It is a fair and just law and is actually a protection to the American shooter. Still a lot of persons tamper with and grind off unsightly serial numbers, refinishing the gun and otherwise doctoring it up merely for appearance's sake. They do not have the slightest idea of violating any laws, but sooner of later they are going to get into trouble. Violations of this Federal Firearms Act may be punished by fines running up to $2,000 or imprisonment up to five years.

There is hardly a mail that turns up without some inquiry in regard to .22 rifles. In no other firearms field has the shooter such a wide choice of standard equipment available. You can spend from around $5.00 to several hundred dollars on a .22 rifle, and it is absolutely impossible for any firearms editor to compare them with all of the different types and grades available.

A hasty check of my files indicates that among six major firearms manufacturers—Marlin, Mossberg, Savage, Stevens, Remington, and Winchester—a total of a hundred and seventy-one different models, combinations of barrel weights, styles, lengths, and sights are listed in the regular lines. This includes various grades of the different guns made.

Marlin makes eight different .22s, Mossberg, fifteen; Savage, sixteen; Stevens, twenty-six; Remington, forty-one, and Winchester, sixty-five.

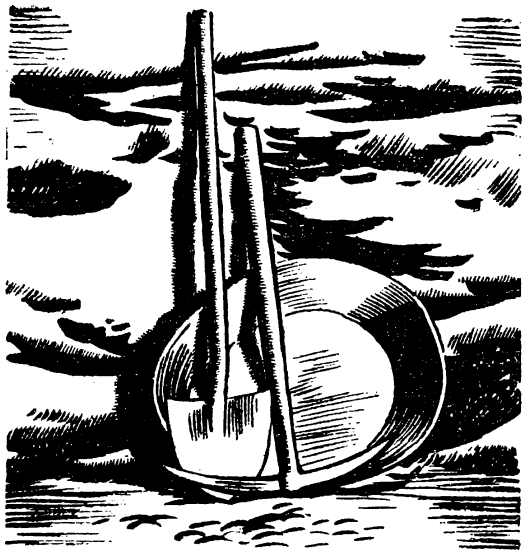
All of these guns are good, but they cover a multitude of purposes from little lightweight rifles intended for youngsters and for general plinking around, up to the super-serious smallbore for target riflemen. The type of gun you may select depends upon, among other things, the type of action you prefer—bolt action, single-shot falling breech action, lever action, slide action, and automatic.

If you wish personal comments on the various models, clearly state what you desire to use the rifle for, the amount of money you wish to spend, and this writer will be glad to aid you in making a choice. However, the majority of these guns compare quite favorably and the selection is more or less a matter of personal preference.

In the above listing, please note that we have not indicated more than thirty samples of mail-order guns available. If you add them in you have more than 200 different .22s to choose from. The smallbore rifleman can take his pick.

If you are interested in making a cartridge collection and would like to hear from other collectors, write to this department, inclosing a three-cent stamp for a list of names which will be sent to you as soon as it is compiled. In this way you may be able to trade some of your duplicates with others for something you really need for your collection.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns And Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

A GOLD pan properly used is all that is needed to prove or disprove the presence of placer gold in a sample of stream gravel. Moreover, it is a fairly accurate method of demonstrating the amount of gold in the particular sample of gravel panned.

But one or two pan samples do not afford a base broad enough on which to plan a season's placer work. Too many enthusiasts rush right into the business of mining the yellow metal the moment they strike colors in the pan. They are apt to be disappointed in the results. And then because no one likes to blame himself for his own mistakes, these fellows are prone to blame prospecting itself for their failure.

Even in small-scale placer operations a careful check-up of the probable over-all gold content of any gravel deposit is advisable. It will save headaches and heartaches later on, and it will certainly provide a definite idea as to where the best values and richest concentrations lie. And if sampling proves up the ground favorably, you will know before you start taking the gold out that success is virtually assured, and roughly how much profit you can reasonably expect from the undertaking.

H. B., of Jamestown, New York, has written for data on sampling placer gold gravels. "It seems to me," he writes, "that preliminary sampling done systematically on a deposit of gold-bearing gravel would be of great help to a prospector before beginning work. Is this customarily done? If so, how?"

It should be done, even though such sampling is at times neglected, H. B. Shallow gravels can be sampled by trenching or digging test pits. Deeper gravels can be sampled by shafts sunk to bedrock. In either case the sample holes should be put in at regular intervals both up and down and across the pay channel. An accurate record of the results should be kept so that when you have finished you have at least a good approximate picture of the whole layout, length and breadth of the gold-bearing channel, depth of gravel, and where and how the best values are distributed.

One of the best methods for keeping such records is by tabulation as the pits and trenches are dug and sampled, supplemented by drawing a rough map and marking on it the locations of the sampled areas and the different results obtained.

In test-pitting, which can be done only in gravels shallow enough for a man to throw the dirt from bedrock to the surface by hand, the customary procedure is, first, to mark out the area of the pit on top of the

ground. Make it rectangular and as small as convenient. It is easier to do your figuring if the dimensions are in even feet. A pit two feet by four feet is a good size. Excavate to bedrock. Keep the side walls smooth and vertical. It is better to throw the dirt from the pit onto a canvas tarp, or board platform rather than onto the bare ground.

Sometimes, to save work, only every fourth, or even every tenth shovelful of gravel is saved for later testing. This reduces the size of the sample that has to be panned for gold. It also reduces the accuracy of the results.

Where the gravel is found in fairly narrow channels pits should be laid out in lines clear across the pay streak and spaced close enough to afford a true conception of the gold content across the whole width of the channel at the point tested. Spacing pits fifty feet apart is good practice. The lines of pits across the pay streak are generally located at from one to two hundred foot intervals.

When good gold values are consistently shown by these test pits through panning the excavated gravel, it may be advisable to set up a rocker for more expeditious handling of a larger bulk of material. This not only increases the accuracy in determining the redeemable gold content, but may also provide, through the actual amounts of gold saved, at least part of the sampling expenses. In rare cases, or rich ground, where a short, stubby rich concentration of comparatively small extent is uncovered, this procedure may return virtually all the sampling expenses.

In gravel too deep for shoveling out by hand, shafts must be substituted for the pits. Four feet by four feet is a good working size for a prospect shaft. Cribbing is necessary to maintain the side walls where the gravel is loose. A hand windlass can be used to hoist the gravel as the shaft reaches depth.

One method of sampling such shafts is to cut a measured channel down one side of the shaft, carefully catching the loosened dirt on a clean canvas placed on the shaft floor. A channel four inches wide and two to four inches deep will when panned give a good line on the average values to be expected. If different types or layers of gravel are encountered, each layer should be sampled separtely and a note of its thickness made in the records. Where the gravel stratum is uniform samples should be taken by channel cut for every five feet of depth attained by the shaft.

Radium, if any, in southern Nevada is the query of B. J. H., of Toledo, Ohio. Yes and no, B. J. H. Radium ore has been found in several places around Jean, about thirty miles south of Las Vegas. So far, however, the prospects don't appear to be sufficiently extensive or rich enough for large-scale commercial development.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

AND here's another note from a grateful member of the Tree who had a letter published some time ago:

Dear Miss Rivers:

I've been meaning to write you for a long time and thank you for publishing my letter to which I received over three hundred replies! I wish you would please tell all the Hollow Tree folks that I'm very sorry I didn't answer everyone's letter and explain that I've been in ill health and, because of the expense involved, couldn't afford postage for all those letters. I thank all, though, from the bottom of my heart for their welcome letters.—Minnie Senini.

We're sorry, Minnie, that you have not been feeling well and hope that each day brings a lot of improvement. I know the Pen Pals whom you didn't answer will forgive you after reading this and we thank you for letting us know.

The West holds a fascination for this Southern belle—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am twenty years old and love the wide open spaces. I intend some day to travel through the West and would like to make friends with Pen Pals living on ranches in Colorado, Texas, Wyoming, Minnesota and New Mexico, or any other Western State. Here's hoping I receive lots of answers.—Louise Simon, Melbourne, Florida.

From Hollywood comes this interesting letter—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am not a lonely cowhand isolated in the last of America's fast dying wilderness, yearning to contact Pen Pals, yet I have been a reader of your Hollow Tree right here in the midst of all Hollywood's glamour and glory. Anything with a Western flavor is my weakness, due, perhaps, to my writing and directing wild-and-woolly movie thrillers for the past ten years.

I have handled most of the horse-opera stars, including Art Acord, Bill Cody, Buffalo Bill, Jr., Jack Perrin, Jean Arthur and others. I would like to exchange Western views, likes and dislikes, or any other frontier angle any of your readers might be interested in. While I do not draw the line, I would prefer hearing from those living on farms and in the eleven Southern States where our movies have enjoyed the greatest number of play dates.—Robert J. Horner, P. O. Box 101, Hollywood, California.

Sounds like Grace likes the boys in blue—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How's for a lonely redhead joining the Hollow Tree gang? I am nineteen years old and my hobbies are writing letters and making a navy scrapbook. My favorite sport is horseback riding. Come on, all you folks, give a gal a break and write to me. I promise to answer all letters.—Grace Bakerly, 7218 Miramonte Boulevard, Los Angeles, California.

You've got to write to J. B. to hear the end of his story—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am an ex-cowhand now in the army. I am thirty-five years old and I've done plenty of ridin' the range where the coyotes howl. But a wrangler's life is not as romantic as it's supposed to be. At times it's plumb aggravatin'. Why I remember one night it was dark and rainin' tuh beat the band and— But just wait —if you want to hear the rest of that tale, you better write. I would also like to ask all the folks in Cody, Wyoming, to write to their old pal.—J. B. Penland, Company M, 22nd Infantry, Fort McClellan, Alabama.

Nellie is lonesome—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a reader of Western Story Magazine and would like to make some friends through the Hollow Tree. I enjoy writing, reading, and collecting snapshots. I live on a farm among the Virginia hills and it is quite lonesome here. I am thirty-one years old and promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Nellie Webb, Rt. No. 3, Hillsville, Virginia.

Get out the old picture album and help this Aussie—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a constant reader of Western Story and I like to compare everything American with everything Australian in connection with cattle and sheep ranching. There is one thing, however, that I have been trying to get for a long time and that is a snap of Bill Cody—better known as Buffalo Bill. Now surely among all your readers there is someone who could oblige me with a snap of that old scout. Here's my proposition: If any reader who corresponds with me, can send one or more snaps of Bill Cody, preferably in his Western outfit, or would like to sell me a negative or exchange snaps or negatives of anything Australian, I will be a square shooter with him or her, young or old, and will exchange any kind of snaps of wild game, such as kangaroos, buffaloes, or snakes, or pictures of Australian cattlemen, wild blacks or bushmen, or anything else. I have over three hundred negatives of these kind of pictures in my possession.—Burt R. Jones, General Post Office, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Pauline is interested in the footlights—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I attend high school and am not lonely, but love corresponding. I have done character acting in several plays and have also written a nautical play. I am very fond of swimming, walking, riding, reading and dancing. I'll do my best to write entertaining letters.—Pauline C. Johnston, 113 Conant Street, Manchester, New Hampshire.

Wyoming can spin some tales, we'll wager—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Won't you please print a request for Pen Pals for a very lonely man in Oregon? I can tell many tales of the West as I have served as a peace officer in several Western States and with the Texas Rangers. I love outdoor sports and make guns and carve in leather. I will answer all letters so please won't someone write to this Westerner?—C. A. (Wyoming) Evans, Box 1021, Klamath Falls, Oregon.

Calling pals from all over the world—outside of England.

Dear Miss Rivers:
This is the first time I have written for Pen Pals and I hope you'll print my letter. I am a young girl of nineteen, living near London. I like sports in general, especially roller-skating and swimming. I would like to hear from pals in New Zealand and any other country outside of England. I promise to answer all letters and also send a picture of myself, so come on, all you pen pushers—I get a kick out of receiving mail.—Rosemary Jennings, 119 Vincent Road, Dagerham, Essex, England.

Write to Bob pronto—

Dear Miss Rivers:
Please include my plea for Pen Pals in your column. I am a really lonely fellow of twenty-four. I like all sports and take a lot of pictures. I will exchange snapshots with all who care to. Please, someone, write to me.—Bob Mead, 2015 Broadway, Lubbock, Texas.

Ada is back a second time—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am just another lonely person looking for Pen Pals. A few years ago I had some in fourteen States and Canada. Circumstances forced me to stop corresponding with them, but now since I won't be able to work for several months, I want to start corresponding again. I come from the Middle West and spent six months in Albuquerque, New Mexico, so I can tell you a few things about the West, although I'm a newcomer compared to some. I will answer all letters and if you want to know more about me, just write. Who'll take this dare?—Ada Healea, General Delivery, Selah, Washington.

Ralph got a good look at their Brittanic majesties—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am out to try and get some Pen Pals, if possible. My hobby is stamp collecting and I enjoy playing the guitar, riding horseback and motorcycling, which is especially appealing to me. I have traveled and will gladly give all the information I can about Canada and about the king and queen. On their recent visit, they stopped in my home town for about a half hour and I got a very good look at them. To the first ten who write I will send a snapshot. Here's hoping you'll sling some ink my way.—Ralph E. Johnson, c/o George E. Johnson, Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada.

Write to these three gals—

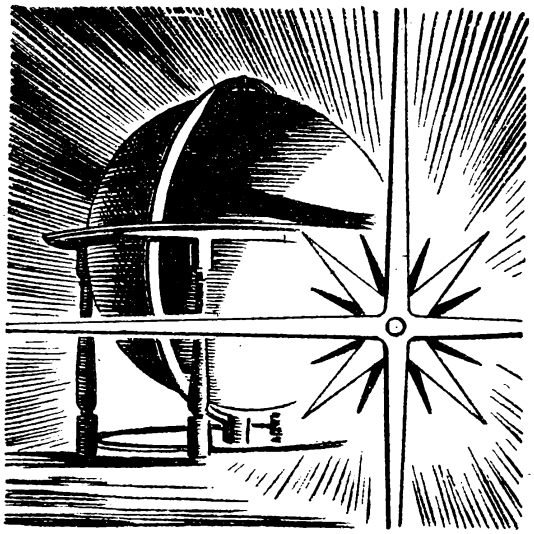
Dear Miss Rivers:
Can you find just a little space for us? We are three beauty operators. Gloria and I work for Marjorie. Marjorie is twenty-nine years old and very good-looking. Gloria is twenty-eight and Barbara is twenty-seven. We will all exchange snaps and answer all letters. We like everything that is fun. Please write us.—Gloria Stewart and Barbara Allen, c/o Marjorie Blaine, Willows, California.

Frank can help you find old songs—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been reading the Hollow Tree for many years and think it's swell. I am in my early twenties and like all sports, especially horseback riding. As a hobby I collect cowboy songs and would like to hear from anyone who cares for this type of music. The first person from each State who writes to me will receive five free copies of sheet music. All others will get one free copy of sheet music. If there's anyone who would like to know what books contain the songs they desire, drop me a line and I'll do my best to help out. I would especially like to hear from persons who are Jimmy Rogers' fans. I'll give them as much information as I possibly can about him. Here's hoping I hear from all you cowboy fans very soon. All letters will be answered.—Frank Karpinski, 15-12 149th Street, Whitestone, L. I., New York.

From Argentina comes this brief note—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a very lonely South American who wishes to correspond with those living all over the world, especially England and North America. I will write more about myself after I hear from you.—Ricardo F. Gomez, Chiclana 3469 Dto. 5, Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

HARRY C., of Chicago, is interested in settling in the vicinity of Boulder Dam, preferably close to the town of Las Vegas, Nevada. He says, "I have heard that Las Vegas is still a frontier town, where they tote hog legs and where the prospectors come in from the hills to shoot their nuggets across the table in a faro game just like they did in the old days. Is that true? What else can you tell me about Las Vegas?"

Well, Harry, Las Vegas, Nevada, is still a frontier town where things run high, wide and handsome. They advertise that it is still a "frontier town," and that you can get any kind of action you want for your money.

However, even a frontier town looks different today from what it did fifty years ago, and Las Vegas is no exception. Folks still come in riding horses, or the prospectors drive their mules in, but they can come on fine paved roads from any direction. And you can find a prospector's mule parked alongside a sixteen-cylinder limousine, while inside the amusement palaces you will find the old prospector laying down his chips alongside a man in a white tie and tail coat. Yes, sir, a frontier town breeds strange bedfellows.

Las Vegas is a growing town, and a lot of folks flock there for the warm winters. The surrounding territory is loaded with scenery and it is only a short distance to Death Valley. Death Valley Scotty, himself, hangs out in Las Vegas a lot.

Another reason for the popularity of this frontier town is the fact that it is only twenty-two miles from Boulder Dam and Boulder City. Boulder Dam is a sight that nobody misses who goes visiting out West. It is the world's greatest engineering project. Boulder City is a model, government-planned townsite and is the headquarters of the people who operate the dam and powerhouses.

Just five miles out of Boulder City is Observation Point where one may get a magnificent view of Lake Mead, formed by the waters that are held in check by the dam. It is one hundred and twelve miles long and backs up into Grand Canyon through some of the most breath-

Nevada still breathes of the old West, but has plenty of modern conveniences. If you are interested in Las Vegas, which claims it is still a frontier town, and want to know more about it, send your name and address to John North, care this magazine. Inclose stamped, self-addressed envelope.

taking scenery a person could imagine.

In addition to the dam and its associated features, Las Vegas is the center of a vast scenic area and playground that includes the Valley of Fire, Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, Cedar Brakes, Zion Canyon, Kaibab Forest, Devil's Paint Shop, Death Valley, and Scotty's Castle, and such mountain resorts as Charleston Park, Deer Creek, Buried City, Gyp Cave, Hidden Forest, Knob Hill, and Eldorado Canyon.

The Valley of Fire trip can be started at the town of Crystal, thirty-three miles east of Las Vegas. the valley extends twenty-nine miles through a scenic wonderland where one may get great vistas of distant mountains and enjoy the lavish color of the vermilion sandstone which changes color with the changing position of the sun until you are almost drunk with color.

Also in the Valley of Fire are records of the earliest civilization known in North America. Seventeen miles from Crystal there are two turn-out roads, each very short, which lead to the Petrified Trees and Atlatl Rock. The Petrified Trees are mute testimony of some ancient cataclysm which leveled the prehistoric giants and preserved them by changing them into stone.

The Atlatl Rock derives its name from the chief weapon used by the primitive people who lived here before the dawn of the Christian era. It was a wooden device for throwing darts, and was used to hunt the animals that came to the springs to drink. At this rock these prehistoric people waited for their quarry, and when they made good kills they used picture writing to record their feats on the rocks. Those pictures still can be seen.

While the visitor is enjoying the past in this locale he should visit Lost City. The original site of this ancient village is now covered by the waters of Lake Mead. It was an adobe town that was built and occupied by the Pueblo Indians somewhere around 500 A. D., and was only discovered by whites in 1924. The Southwest Museum restored the town and moved it intact to a point near Overton, on the east side of the Moapa Valley. The race of people who built the city has long since died out.

For a change from the flatlands, the Charleston Mountain trip offers another kind of scenery. Thirty-five miles northwest of Las Vegas, on a paved highway, Mount Charleston Resort is reached.

The mountain is close to twelve thousand feet high, a rise of four thousand feet in three miles, so the trip up is pretty steep going. But from the summit you can get a view of Mt. Tempiute to the north, Mount Wilson to the south, Virgin Peak to the east, and Mount Whitney to the west. There are short hikes to waterfalls, and trails leading to all kinds of secluded beauty spots and lookout points. If you are there in winter you can enjoy all the snow sports.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Missing Department

UMFRESS, GEORGE BENJAMIN—He was last seen in 1920. At the present time we believe he is in Texas or Oklahoma. He is about fifty years old and has black hair, blue eyes, and is about five feet six inches tall. Any information concerning his whereabouts will be greatly appreciated by his niece, Edith Umfress, Rt. No. 2a, Red Bay, Alabama.

MEISTER, JOSEPH C.—He is about sixty-nine years old and has lived in Spokane, Washington; Missoula, Montana; Galveston, Texas; and Alaska. If anyone knows him, please write to me, Lawrence Meister, 327 North 9th Street, Klamath Falls, Oregon.

JOHNSON, LEONARD—He left home seven years ago and when last heard of was in Nebraska. If anyone knows my brother's whereabouts, please notify me, Donald Johnson, R. R. No. 1, Box 137, Menahga, Minnesota.

RICHINGS, STANLEY—Last seen in October, 1938, in West Springfield, Massachusetts. He is between forty and fifty years old, weighs about two hundred, and his height is five feet nine inches. "Stanley, grandmother died and we need you to settle the children's finances." If anyone knows his whereabouts please notify Mrs. Vera MacCormack, 424 Main Street, Agawam, Massachusetts.

STURM or FRITCHLEY, VIRGINIA—She was last heard from in 1937 at which time she was living on Meadeville Street in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is twenty-three years old and has dark hair and blue eyes. She may be working as a waitress. Her nickname is Jinx. Anyone knowing her whereabouts, write to Mrs. Raymond Shade, 2918-6 Avenue Rear, Altoona, Pennsylvania.

THOMAS, JACK—He is my mother's brother and was last heard of in Lebanon, Tennessee. My mother died in 1896 and she had not heard from him since she was married in 1888. I would like to get in touch with him or his children. If anyone has any information about these relatives, please write to Zora May Christopher, 117 Foster Street, Nashville, Tennessee.

TATRO, ALFRED EDWARD—He left home in 1920 at the age of sixteen and has not been heard from since. His father is dead and I am alone here. I miss him very much and long to hear some word from him. "Alfred, please write to your mother. I want to know how you are."—Mrs. Lena Tatro, 20 Memorial Street, Baldwinsville, Massachusetts.

HOXIE, EDWIN C.—He is my father and when last heard from he was in Amarillo, Texas. He is fifty-four years old, has blue eyes, light-brown curly hair, and is five feet eight inches tall. He was born in Corning, Iowa, and lived in that State most of his life. I have tried every known way to find him, but have had no success. If he sees this, and loves me, I wish he'd write and let me know where he is.—Harriet Hoxie Maioni, 1221—54th Street, Rt. No. 1, Box 70, Galveston, Texas.

NOTICE—I am trying to locate someone who lived on East 58th Street, between Second and First Avenues, New York City, between 1866 and 1871, and knew David Thomas and his wife. In 1871 they went to England and took their son, Harry, along. He returned to New York City about 1901. He is not able to find his birth certificate and is therefore unable to collect his old age pension. If anyone can help me, will they please write?—Harry Thomas, in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

BRUMLEY, LAVIS—She is my daughter and was last seen in December, 1938, at which time she was working in the Malden Green Lantern. She is eighteen years old, five feet, two inches tall, weighs about one hundred and thirty-seven pounds, and has dark-brown hair, blue-gray eyes and a fair complexion. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please notify her mother, Mrs. Lela Grayum, Dudley, Missouri.

CHAPMAN, JACK—He is my son and has not been heard from since March, 1937, when he left his home in De Soto, Iowa. He is thirty-two years old, weighs one hundred and seventy-five pounds, is five feet eight inches tall, and has light hair and blue eyes. If anyone knows his whereabouts, tell him everything is O. K. and notify his mother, Mrs. Claude Chapman, De Soto, Iowa.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from Nellie, grandchild of either Theodore Jacob or Kate Van Valkinburgh. The family lived in Rome, Waterford and Saratoga Springs, New York. My grandfather, Franklin Van Valkinburgh, was born in Saratoga Springs. If anyone has any information about the above it will be greatly appreciated. Write to Sabra Van Valkinburgh, in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

WELCH, CHESTER and CLARENCE—They are my father's brothers and I would like some information concerning their where-

abouts. They left their home in Pennsylvania many years ago and haven't been heard from since. My father was Stephen Welch and there were twelve in the family. He had to go to Ohio for his health and never heard from any of them. If one or both of my uncles see this, I wish they would write to me, Mrs. William Gray, 1572 Lagonda Avenue, Springfield, Ohio.

ROPPER, NICK—He was last heard of in Kansas City. I think he has black hair, and dark-brown eyes. He is about five feet ten inches tall, medium build, and the ends of his two middle fingers are off above the first joint. "Nick, won't you write to me and let me make amends for the mistake." Or if anyone knows his whereabouts, please write to Bruce Bozarth, Company F, 15th Infantry, Fort Lewis, Washington.

BURNESS, ROBERT J.—He is my father and hasn't been heard from since 1926. At that time he was employed by Young Brothers Ladder Company in Greendale, Massachusetts, and was living in Worcester. He is between fifty and sixty years of age. If anyone has any information concerning his whereabouts, it will be appreciated by his son and daughter, John and Julia Burness, 14 Maple Street, Spencer, Massachusetts.

MOFFETT, HUBERT—He is my husband and has been missing since March, 1937. He is a World War veteran, forty-three years old, five feet nine inches tall. We believe he is working in the northern or western part of the country either on a farm or in an orchard. His family would like to hear from him and if anyone who sees this, knows him, please tell him all is forgiven and to write his wife, Mrs. G. Moffett, in care of the Missing Department, Western Story Magazine.

NOTICE—I would like to learn the whereabouts of a family by the name of D'Olive. When last heard of they were living in Dayton, Ohio. Mr. D'Olive worked for the Fyr-Fighter Company in Dayton. They have a son named Eugene. Any news of them would be appreciated. Write to Private Monte F. Ricketts, Battery E, Tenth Field Artillery, Fort Lewis, Washington.

NOTICE—Will anyone by the name of Taber who is related to the Tabers who once owned the Windsor Hotel in Denver, Colorado, or anyone by the name of Beckman or Becker get in touch with me. I was adopted in 1898 in New Mexico by people named Fagala and am trying to find some information about my real parents.—Mrs. Frances M. Echols, 452 Franklin Street, San Benito, Texas.

ATTENTION—I have lost track of my folks and have been trying to locate them for the past thirty years. I was born in Sweden in 1864, and in 1880 left Stora Lund. My father's name is Johan Peter Peterson and I had two sisters, Emele and Matilda Peterson. My name in Sweden was Carl Johan Johanson. Some of my folks are living in the United States. If anyone has any information for me, it will be greatly appreciated.—Charles Anderson, 1013 Delta Avenue, Gladstone, Michigan.

WRIGHT, JAMES—He was last heard of in New York City eight years ago. He was a private in the army then. "Jimmy, write to your old friend. You remember 'Mac'." Or if anyone knows his present address, I'd appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Ernest R. McIlvain, 7 Water Street, Canton, Pennsylvania.

CATE, JOHN—He is my son and was last heard from in July, 1937, at which time he was in Wilson, Wyoming. He is twenty-two years old, has brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. Any information will be greatly appreciated.—Mrs. Walter Cate, Muldoon, Idaho.

NOTICE—I would like to get in touch with some of my father's relatives. My father was born in San Bernardino, California, in April, 1883, and married Evie Duncan in 1902. His wife and son, Earl, left California for Montana in 1904. My father was drowned in the Kootenai River on May 4th of this year. Eyra Makin, an uncle of my father's, was last heard of near Le Grande, Oregon. A married sister ran a laundry somewhere on the John Day River. I would appreciate hearing from any of these people or their children.—Gordon Makin, Yaak via Troy, Montana.

FISK, MRS. LILLIAN—She is my sister and I last heard from her about twenty-two years ago at which time she was in San Diego, California. She sent her little boy, Thaddeus, to me about a year before that. She planned going to Coos Bay, Oregon, and said she might remarry. Both her son and I are anxious to hear from her or anyone who knows anything about her whether she is dead or alive.—Mrs. May Lytle, Rt. No. 1, Clayton, Washington.

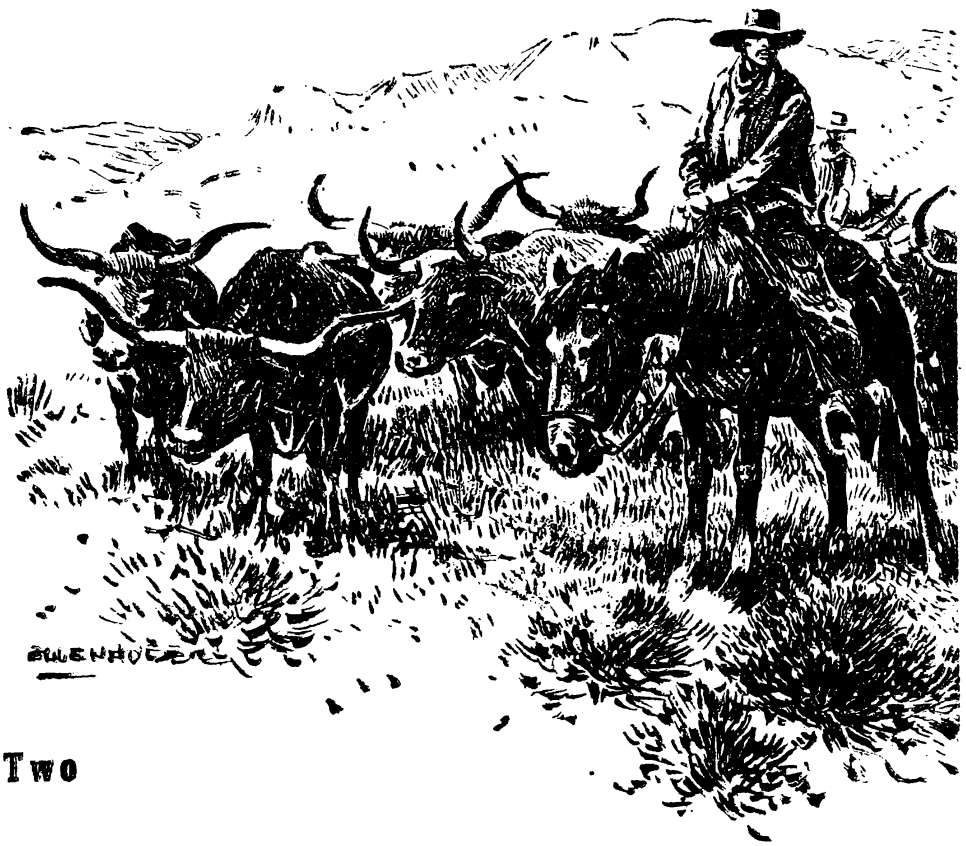
● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



Part Two

RANGE OF HUNTED MEN

by JAY LUCAS

The Story So Far:

GRANT HORTON, famous outlaw, known throughout the Arizona Territory as the Kit Fox, was formerly an army officer, but he was a Southerner and at the outbreak of the Civil War was charged with irregularities, was discredited and sent to prison. It was that which drove him to an outlaw's career after the war.

Grant holds up a stage and among its occupants finds Blackie Lindsey, a rival outlaw, and Captain Montgomery, the officer who was responsible for Grant's court martial. With Montgomery is Jane Mulholland, his fiancée.

Grant robs Lindsey, and only the presence of Jane prevents his killing Captain Montgomery. Jane almost tricks Grant into waiting until Montgomery's troop arrives, but Grant escapes.

In the days that follow, Grant learns that he is being followed by three murderous Apaches who are trailers for the army. Against army regulations the Indians are without the restraining presence of a white man. Grant reaches a cabin, owned by one of several friendly families who keep his relays of horses, and stops to rest. During the night he awakens and discovers that the cabin is surrounded—by whom he doesn't know.

A herd blocked the stage and Grant had a hunch trouble was closing in.

CHAPTER IV

THE ATTACK

HERE was Grant, faced with a screaming, hysterical woman two wailing children, a doddering old man loading a rifle with trembling hands—and outside the cabin, no telling what!

"They won't git you, Helen!" came the old man's shaky voice. "I won't let 'em git you or the chillun! I'll fix that right now!"

Grant leaped in the darkness. He ran straight into the muzzle of the rifle; it was a miracle that the old man didn't pull the trigger. Grant snatched quickly and threw the muzzle of the gun aside and up. It went off, with a deafening roar. The scream of the woman rose louder and finally Grant lost his temper.

"Stop it!" he snapped. "Stop it, I say!"

His words were useless, for the family was in utter panic. He could

faintly see the white blur of Helen's face where she sat on the side of the bed, her baby in her arms, swaying wildly from side to side, as she screamed. Two steps took him to her. He knew of but one cure for hysterics. He swung his arm, and the flat of his hand cracked across her cheek.

"Stop it, Helen!" he commanded, his voice hard and firm.

"Oh-h-h, they'll take me out an'—Oh-h-h my babies—my babies!"

"Stop it!"

Grant slapped her again and some fear of him came and mingled with that of the Apaches. She stopped screaming suddenly, and her face ceased to work. But the old man was now struggling with Grant for the rifle.

"I have to do it, suh!" he pleaded. "Bettah than lettin' them Injuns have 'em!"

Grant shoved him off roughly and said, "Don't be a fool! Time enough to think of that if they get in. Let go of the gun or I'll crack you!"

"But, Mistuh Horton—"

"Let go! I tell you I'll knock you down!"

He meant it, and old Gramp realized it. He let go of the gun. Grant whirled back to the woman.

"Stop those children from crying, or I'll slap them, too."

That almost brought complete silence. Old Gramp had not had the hysteria of the woman and children; his tone had showed only hopelessness and grim desperation. He spoke pretty quietly now, though his voice trembled.

"What *do* we do, suh?" he pleaded.

"We sit down and think it over. Here, sit down!"

He forced Gramp into a chair, and he himself groped for a stool and sat on it. They were in a pretty desperate situation he knew, but he was too furious with rage to feel fear. This thing was unheard of—an officer of the United States army sending Apaches against white men! He was so angry that he was not thinking of safety so much as of getting even. He sat for a minute or so, principally to give the others time to get over their first wild panic.

"Gramp," he said after moment. "If I give you the rifle back, will you promise me not to use it on—anybody in the room, unless they're getting in?"

The old man promised in a tone which showed that he was beginning to feel ashamed of his first terror. Grant turned to Helen and talked quickly, soothingly to her. She had a good deal of common sense after all, and presently he got his own rifle and gave it to her. He would have preferred to keep the rifle himself, but he would not trust a revolver in her inexperienced hands. He wished that Tom, the woman's husband, were here. He had never seen him in a pinch, but he believed the silent, quiet-eyed young man would have stood firm.

"All right now," Grant said. "One of you get to each window. Fire a shot once in a while, but be careful to save cartridges. If it's who I think it is, there are only four of them, and they can't get in as long as we fight them off."

He hoped it was only the four scouts who had been sent after him, but he had heard rumors that the Chiricahua Apaches—Cochise's band—were off the reservation. In that case, this thing was entirely hopeless, but wild yarns about the Chiricahua being out were always flying around to keep the settlers in a state of constant fear.

Now that he had got the others

quieted, Grant went into action. He raked the ashes out of the fireplace and to one side, and, lying on a blanket, began prying quietly but quickly at the stones. They were, of course, set in mud and it gave way easily. The chief difficulty was to avoid having a stone above drop down into the opening and make a noise.

Presently the hole was large enough. He slipped back and whispered quick instructions to the old man and the woman, and made them promise to obey. Then he was crawling out through the hole, slowly, carefully. It was not likely that he would be noticed here, but had he tried to slip through the door or through one of the windows, he would surely have been seen.

Still, it was ticklish; there was the possibility that a rifle butt would brain him as he was half through.

OUTSIDE, he rose slowly to his feet, pressing back into the dense darkness where the chimney made an angle against the wall. He stood there a long time, peering, listening, but he could not even guess where those men might be lying in the brush, and he knew that it would be useless to try to make sure.

His plan had been to crawl between them, get behind and come up from their rear. He had thought that getting outside would be the hard part. Now he saw that it was the easiest. Out here, once his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, he could see fairly well—which meant that so could they. Thirty feet or more of bare, sandy ground lay between him and the nearest scrub oaks on this side. To cross it unseen appeared out of the question, and to be seen meant to be shot from ambush.

Even a dull brain works with rapidity in a crucial time—and Grant's was never dull. Within seconds, he stooped, reached back through the hole, and pulled the blanket out quietly. One side was covered with ashes from the fireplace and streaked with soot. He left that side up, lay down beside the wall where the darkness was thick, and pulled the blanket over him. He discarded his gun belts and one gun. He got all set—his left hand shoving a corner of the blanket ahead, his right holding the gun and also the blanket far out to one side, with the rest spread over his outstretched legs behind. Then by little snakelike movements of his body, he started inching his way forward.

Presently the clouds broke slightly. Half across that bare spot lay a vague blur on the ground, and for twenty minutes, until the clouds thickened again, there was not the least movement of that shadow on the ground. But presently dawn began to appear, and the thing was gone.

Grant had judged that the Apaches would be facing the four sides of the house squarely, so he had slipped out straight from a corner. He left the blanket rolled up and hidden under the first bush, and kept on, creeping carefully, straining his eyes ahead. He did not know what instant a bullet might come; it would be an Apache trick to have fun with him by letting him creep directly up to one of them before shooting. Another advantage of that would be that they could break an arm, or perhaps both, and take him alive. Shooting a man dead was not their notion of sport.

It was risky, nerve-straining. But finally he knew that he must have got far enough out to be behind

them. He circled to come in behind the boulders, that being the only spot where he knew there had been a man. Dawn was getting pretty strong now. Inch by inch he crept in, but he could see nobody there. He became uneasy.

And suddenly came the wild, hysterical scream of the woman, and the wails of the children rose to join it. And, mingling with that, a sound that made Grant's blood freeze in his veins—the muffled yells of Apaches. And shots!

Grant leaped up and ran, cocking his gun. If there should be one of them left outside, that one would get him in the back, but he didn't even think of that! In seconds, he was at the door. Still barred! How had they got in?

He leaped back, lunged forward and his shoulder tore the light bolt loose. He went headlong into the room. And before he knew it he was locked in battle with a half-clad figure that had leaped inside his gun. This one was holding him, and another was springing toward him with a knife. He saw the knife sweep up and down toward his wrist to cut the tendons. They still wanted to take him alive.

He brought his knee up with all his strength, and the man holding him partly released his grasp. Grant tore his right arm loose and managed to twist his gun around and fire. He felt the Indian collapse, but before he had struck the floor he himself was dropping to one knee. A bullet crashed over him! And then the one who had fired was lying with his head in the fireplace, his headband slipped off for Grant had given him no time for a second shot.

Then Grant was standing in dead silence—the silence, the stillness, seemed to hurt after that terrific flurry of action. Through it came no sound whatever. Had Gramp kept his promise? Had he made certain that the Apaches could not get Helen and the children alive?

THIS flashed wildly through Grant's mind as he turned and ran to the door—there were no more Indians in the cabin or they would be firing. He stumbled over a soft bulk and stooped quickly to feel it. His hand touched what he recognized as a beard; it was wet and sticky. Then he was in the doorway. One could see well outside now. He swept his eyes across the bushes, waiting for a shot to come. And almost instantly he heard the sound of running horses—four running horses. So the two left were, Apache fashion, driving off the horses of the others. Grant leaped to the boulders and climbed hastily to the topmost. He had a glimpse of a single fleeing back through an opening in the tall scrub oaks. He fired, but the distance was too great and he missed. Where was the fourth Indian—if there had been four?

Suddenly he heard a running horse coming toward him at a furious pace from the other side. He swung his eyes to meet it, and presently the rider burst wildly through the bushes—hatless, coatless, with white face and staring eyes, but with a rifle in his hand. Tom Harper! He was riding bareback on a horse that still wore harness.

He saw Grant and shouted, "Are they— Are they—" He tumbled from the horse and gasped. "Helen? For God's sake—"

"Let's go see," said Grant heavily, already sure in his own mind.

Tom, in his panic, reached the door ahead of him. Grant entered to see him kneeling beside the still

Continued on page 100

AN EXCITING THRILL-PACKED

TRIP TO THE REAL WEST

J. A. THOMPSON, who conducts the MINES AND MINING department in WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE, is running a series of tours out of Chicago by which you visit the bonanza Tom Reed multi-million-dollar gold mine, a prospector's camp, Boulder Dam, Ghost City, a real cattle ranch, have a real barbecue supper, a moonlight ride across the desert, a rodeo with horse racing and riding. If any of our WESTERN STORY readers want to spend a real vacation, write us for information and we will send you a folder. We do not hesitate to recommend this trip for thrill after thrill.

WESTERN TRAIL TRIP:

(Condensed Itinerary)

Sunday—Leave Chicago 8:45 p. m.

Monday—Arrive Kansas City 7:20 a. m.

Tuesday—Arrive William, Arizona, 5:00 p. m.

Wednesday—Arrive Grand Canyon 8:30 a. m.

Wednesday—Arrive Kingman 8:07 p. m.

Thursday—Forenoon visit to Oatman, and bonanza Tom Reed multi-million-dollar gold mine. Afternoon off to Kenyon and Ames Chemehuevis small scale prospector's camp and gold mine. Barbecue supper. Chance for individual prospecting, and back to Kingman in evening, via moonlight ride across the desert.

Friday—Excursion to Boulder Dam and Lake Mead. Overnight Boulder Dam Hotel.

Saturday—Visit to ghost town of White Hills, active mining camp of Chloride, and return to Kingman.

Sunday—Full day at a real working ranch. Chuck Wagon dinner, rodeo, horse races, and riding horses available for those who wish to ride. Return Kingman, and embark on train for Los Angeles at 8:07 p.m.

Monday—Arrive Los Angeles 7:00 a. m.

Tuesday—In Los Angeles and Hollywood.

Wednesday—Arrive San Francisco 8:15 a.m.

Thursday—Visit San Francisco Exposition. Leave at night.

Friday—Arrive Ogden, Utah, en route home.

Saturday—En route East. Sunday arrive Chicago.

The tour, complete, takes exactly two weeks, and is being offered in two classes as follows:

Tour No. 1—$162.50. This tour includes railroad fare, with Pullman accommodation (Tourist Class) from Chicago and back to Chicago, and all expenses of the four days in Kingman. It does not include meals on train, or side trips for the days in Los Angeles and San Francisco on which days tourists will be on their own, regarding expenses and choice of what they wish to do with their time.

Tour No. 2—$196.50. At this price, tour includes: Railroad fares with Pullman from Chicago and back to Chicago, all meals on train (the famous Santa Fe Scout), all expenses for the Kingman trips, hotels, bus, etc., hotels in Los Angeles, with trip to Hollywood studios, and free admission to San Francisco Exposition. Also all meals on return trip by rail to Chicago.

Incidentally, tour members can remain longer in San Francisco if they wish, as the return ticket is good for several months, and can be used on any railroad from the coast back to Chicago.

Continued from page 98

figure of a woman on the floor. He was sobbing in a manner that almost broke Grant's heart. He had never thought the stolid, level-headed Tom Harper capable of tears. Tom stood up. Grant bent over the old man, feeling for heartbeats. He, too, stood up, his breath caught in his throat. Tom only nodded, his face ashy gray.

He began to speak, rambling, muttering: "Heerd Cochise was offn the Reservation— Drove all night to git here an'— Heerd shots a mile off—"

And had unhitched one of the horses and ridden him in to find— this. Grant could not understand how the Indians had got in here, but something about the light in the cabin made him look up. He saw a hole they had made in the low, flimsy roof through which they had dropped. It was a typical Apache trick. If he had only been inside!

"The—young uns?" asked Tom, in a daze. He started blindly to the door, to seek them outside. He raised his voice, and it broke as he called, "Lee! Jennie!"

A whimpering, forlorn little cry of "Paw!" and two pairs of bare feet came pattering out of Grant's room where their mother had shoved them. They clung to their father's hands, wailing broken-heartedly, but he was too numb to stoop and take them in his arms.

"Jerry—little Jerry?" he asked.

Crying, one pointed to the room from which they had come. A stride or two, and Tom was through the door. In a moment he was back, the infant held close to his big chest as though he would never let go of it again.

Gray dawn was pretty strong in there now. Grant saw an Indian lying in the middle of the floor, the top of his head blown off. So Gramp had shot the fourth, probably as he dropped through the hole above, and an instant before he himself was killed. How, then, had Gramp had time to shoot the woman? He couldn't have had time, and a great feeling of relief came over Grant. He didn't like to think of the old man killing Helen, even to save her from the Apaches.

The first Indian he had encountered lay on his back on the floor but Grant didn't recognize him. He went to the one on the hearth and turned him over—for the tall, slender figure seemed familiar. So did the face, and for a moment he thought it was Hornedtoad, but there was a deep old scar across the bridge of the man's nose. Hornedtoad had not had that the day before. Then it came to him. He had heard of Hornedtoad's brother, Aksa-keeta; one had about as evil a reputation as the other.

He went and stooped over the woman, seeking her wounds. He found blood on her head, but saw that it came from a blow and not a bullet wound. He darted out a hand to feel for heartbeats, and that instant heard a faint moan. He leaped up and shouted, "She's alive!"

"Helen!" Tom cried. "Helen!"

Tom almost flung the infant on the bed and swooped to pick his wife up in his brawny arms. Grant dashed to the water pail and returned with a dipperful to throw in her face. But as he came back he saw one of her hands moving feebly to stroke Tom's curly brown hair. And the stolid Tom was holding Helen to him as a moment before he had held the infant, while tears ran down his face and his big shoulders shook.

It was too much for Grant. He

hurried out to sit on the lowest of the boulders, while his thoughts turned backward. He was remembering his first quarrel with Montgomery, back in his army days when they were both lieutenants. He had stopped Montgomery from butchering the squaws and children of an Apache ranchería. From then had dated Montgomery's enmity.

Had he, he wondered now, been right in saving that Indian village? Apaches were devils. The peaceful, farming Pimas and Maricopas had found that out long before the coming of the white men. Always the Apaches had lived only by raiding and pillaging and slaughtering the peaceful tribes; the word *mercy* they had never heard. Perhaps Montgomery had been right, after all; perhaps the Apaches should be utterly exterminated, stamped out root and branch.

Perhaps. The word stuck in Grant's mind, for he was a man of unusual clarity and honesty of thought. Raiders and killers the Apaches always had been, but they had been mainly hunters living on the fruit of the chase. They and the Navahos had come here centuries ago from Canada, from the Athabasca country—and still the older tribes here lived as before.

And his own people, the whites, had almost exterminated the natives of a continent, had cheated and murdered and debased the pitiable remainder of a once proud race, had herded that scanty remnant onto wretched little reservations of land so poor the whites did not want them, and left them to starve there. How would his own race of liars and butchers like to be treated thus by aliens of a different color, who happened to be better murderers? The Apaches had the worst name of any Indians—merely because they were better fighters for their homeland.

CHAPTER V

GRANT'S COW OUTFIT

FOR well over two months nothing was heard of the Kit Fox, and the younger stage drivers were beginning to breathe easy. He specialized in stage robbing, since it was safer for one man than holding up banks, though not likely to bring such big hauls. Bank robbery was hardly a one-man job, and the Kit Fox always played a lone hand. But the older drivers only shrugged. They knew that such respites came about twice a year. The tougher of them joked about it, and said that the man needed his holidays, since he worked so hard most of the time.

Then one dark night Grant Horton stood on a hilltop concealed by cedars, watching a cabin below. It was only a poverty-stricken cabin, but around it were carelessly built shacks and rude corrals, and there were both a wagon and a buckboard standing near the tiny blacksmith shop. From out behind him in the hills came the trumpeting of a range bull.

Presently Grant tied his horse. He took off his spurs and walked quietly down, both his Colts buckled on and his rifle in his hand. He kept the cabin between him and the low bunkhouse as he stole to the one window and peeped in. Then he went to the door and knocked gently. The door opened and a man several years older than himself, a man with a short, silky beard, stood on the threshold.

"Why, hello, Grant!" he exclaimed.

"Howdy, Clay."

Grant slipped in. The other turned and went hastily to a bunk

in the corner to come back with a blanket which he hung over the window. He limped badly. One foot was booted, but the other was a queer thing, boot shaped, sawed from light wood.

"How does it work?" asked Grant anxiously.

The bearded man looked down at the queer foot with pride and said, "Fine! That certainly was a good idea you had. I can swing it over a saddle and find my stirrup about as well as I ever could, and riding doesn't tire me nearly so much as it did with that peg. Any news in San Francisco?"

"There is. Big news. I heard rumors, and I asked the banker; who said they were true. Clay, there are two railroads coming through the Territory. They're almost ready to start work on the southern one."

"Two!"

"Two! Not that anybody cares a hang about Arizona, but they must have railroads to the West coast and they can't go around us. Know what that means?"

"Do I, Grant! A market for your cattle, towns here to use beef. You were right—I see it now. It had to come."

"Be careful, Clay. If anybody knew we were brothers, they'd seize this place and run you out. Remember how they treated Lieutenant Sattler for being a Confederate sympathizer—jailed him and took his mines."

Clay chuckled and passed a hand over his beard. "I don't look very much like you with this. I'm Mr. Clay Tracy, the man with backers on the coast. The bank here sees all my checks from Thurlow Baxter in San Francisco."

"And," Grant smiled, "the Frisco bankers know me well enough as Baxter to send an agent out here for me to sell the ranch, if anything came up. Clay, it won't be very long now until we can sell out, and I can get away where I'm not known. I've been wondering if I couldn't raise a beard, too, and come here as Baxter. Somehow I've got to—like Arizona."

"Why couldn't you? But, Grant—" Clay hesitated. "I'm afraid— Jim Cornell claims the two waterholes in White Rock Valley. Maybe he's heard of the railroad coming. He's bought more cattle, and he's trying harder to crowd us out. He's a fighter—the damn Yankee!"

Grant looked uneasy. A fighter his brother was not, in spite of having lost a foot in the War.

"What right does he think he has?" he asked angrily.

"He says he has a right to all the range he can use, as he was the only white man who stayed here while the War was on."

"That took nerve," Grant nodded, staring into the cold fireplace. "He had to fight off the Apaches all by himself, with the soldiers gone. And he did it, and kept his scalp. But that doesn't give him a right to all Arizona for his cattle, as he thinks it does. Clay" he looked up suddenly, "do you think you can handle him—the row?"

"I'm not the fighter you are, Grant. He—he's taken Blue Tanks from us, and we had cattle there first. If it keeps up, we'll have nothing to sell when the railroad comes. Grant, I'm . . . I'm sorry."

One does not expect a bearded man's lips to twitch, but Clay's did. He shook his head and went on slowly, "Grant, I've made up my mind. I'm getting out. Get somebody else to run this place for you, somebody who can."

"No, it won't do. A hint that the Kit Fox owns this place and they'd seize everything here. And every cent I've got has gone into the cattle."

He looked troubled, badly troubled. A finer fellow than his brother Clay had never lived, but he was one more of those who had no business out here in the wild, lawless Territory of Arizona. Absently Grant pulled out his watch and glanced at it—it was the one he had taken from Captain Montgomery. Clay gasped audibly at sight of it. Grant unsnapped the timepiece and silently handed it to his brother.

"Where—where did you get it?" Clay asked with a tremor in his voice.

"Montgomery. Robbed him on a stage."

"And—didn't kill him, Grant?" The mild Clay looked fierce; he was white and trembling.

"No," Grant said, "there were ladies on the stage. I told him I'd see him again."

He slowly snapped the watch back on its chain. With a jerk, he thrust it into his pocket and changed the subject deliberately.

"How much range is Jim Cornell claiming? Can't you talk to him, compromise?"

"He says we can't water cattle in the Verde on either side. He wants both sides!"

"What! Why, that would leave us without *any* water—not enough for fifty head in dry years! This has to be stopped!"

"How?" asked Clay, throwing out his hand helplessly.

"I don't know. I'll go see him tomorrow and size him up. He doesn't know me. Maybe I'll have to be the Kit Fox, and—" His lips tightened.

"I think you will have to. He's a Yankee. Had supper?"

Grant ate but he did not stay much longer. That night, as most

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nights, he slept out on a hillside wrapped in a single blanket. He had made an appointment for next morning with his brother, who met him in thick cedars five miles from the ranch. They spent several hours talking together, and they even risked riding cautiously around a little, to look over some of the cattle in their CT brand. That evening, some time before sunset, Grant rode for the J Bar W.

HE stared around curiously when he arrived, for this place was famous all over Arizona. There was a great adobe house, its deep windows showing the thickness of the walls. Its roof was nearly flat, and around it ran a parapet about four feet high, pierced by small loopholes. In the middle was a tall, slender watchtower, also loopholed, from which a man could see a great distance.

The place was no less than a fortress, having been built to stand off Apache raids during that period when the soldiers had been called away. Oddest of all, was the great adobe corral built against the house. Earth was banked against its outer walls like a dam. Grant had heard the reason for this; a rifleman in the high watchtower could sweep the ground clear to the foot of those sloping walls out there, leaving no hiding place.

Up on a hillside lay a little fenced plot with seven or eight crosses in it and some straight posts. This was the famous private graveyard of Jim Cornell, where he buried outlaws and Indians he had shot or hanged. According to the stories Grant had heard, there should have been at least fifty graves there. There were about a dozen; such things are always exaggerated in the telling.

Grant rode toward a man who was stooped over, mending a wagon. The man straightened up and called, "Welcome, stranger. Get down. Just time to put your horse up for the night before supper."

"Thanks," Grant answered, "but I can't stay all night. Glad to have supper if it's not too much trouble."

"Trouble!" The man laughed a jolly, low laugh. "My place here is the only hotel in this part of Arizona. Nobody barred from bullwhackers to Apaches except the man who offers to pay."

They were openly sizing each other up. Grant saw a tall, thin man with thinning hair and a grizzled mustache drooping over the corners of his mouth. He looked loose-jointed, active, and pleasant. There was nothing odd about him but that his keen gray eyes kept drifting unconsciously over the hillsides all around, as though missing no slightest movement anywhere. His thin, rugged face was almost kindly, and certainly friendly. He looked like anythnig but the man who had fought all the Apache tribes single-handed until they learned to go far around his place, the man who captured outlaws and hanged them with his own hands. Resolute he looked, but certainly not the dangerous man he was.

Grant dismounted. Cornell went into a low adobe and came out with a *morral* heavy with oats. "Hang that on your horse, friend," he said, "and let's go to the house."

Grant slipped the bridle off Star, tied the horse to a hitching rack put on the *morral*, but left the saddle on. They had started to the house side by side, when Cornell stopped apologetically.

"My wife—you know how women are. They don't understand men's doings. I'd better call you something."

"Why . . . er . . . how about Smith? Nice, easy name."

Their eyes met and both grinned.

"You're the first honest man that has been here in a month."

"Honest?"

"Sure. Not pretending it's your right name." Cornell laughed genially.

"Quite a crowd you have," remarked Grant, nodding to the cowboys strolling toward the house. He was referring to the number, but Cornell misunderstood him.

"Yes, quite a crowd. At least two-thirds of them are murderers wanted in Texas or California."

"Doesn't it make you uneasy?"

"Uneasy?" Jim Cornell looked up in surprise. "Why, no. I can handle them, and they know it. If they started anything, a few of them would land up there." He jerked his head casually to the little fenced plot on the hillside.

Grant pursed his lips and eyed Cornell again. So this quiet, thin-faced man thought he could shoot it out with the lot of them and win—and he possibly could. Grant had long ago learned that one cannot always go by appearances, but rarely had appearances been more deceptive than in Jim Cornell's case.

They went into the house where, in the great living room, a woman came to meet them. She was obviously a Mexican of the higher class, with that tall, graceful figure often found among her kind. She was several years younger than Cornell.

"Bianca, this is Mr. Smith, a"—the shrewd gray eyes flicked humorously over Grant—"a young civil engineer. Mr. Smith, my wife, Doña Bianca."

They shook hands, and she murmured a polite sentence or two. She spoke English perfectly, without accent, but for a slight, agreeable softening of the harsher sounds. She had a grave dignity and charm.

"Want to wash before we eat, Mr. Smith?" asked Cornell. He led Grant to the kitchen and nodded to a dark little cubbyhole opening from it.

Grant washed slowly and carefully, and combed his hair. From the big kitchen came the clatter of pots and pans, and the merry voices of the two Mexican woman cooks. Cowboys were stamping in, and laborers—Mexicans—from the big fields in the draw below the house. There was a great clatter of hoofs outside, and Grant was beginning to wonder what on earth Cornell could do with so many cowboys. He finished combing his hair, and turned, starting to leave the little wash room. Then he suddenly jerked back.

That last contingent of horsemen wore blue uniforms! Cavalry! One trooper was already crowding into the wash room, with a careless nod to Grant.

Grant did the only thing he could do; he nodded back casually and went strolling out. Of course, he had left both revolvers with their belts hanging on his saddlehorn—to wear guns openly into a house was a declaration of war. He covertly opened a button or two on his shirt to give ready access to a big bulge under his left arm.

Soldiers were everywhere, and their horses! There seemed to be a whole troop. They were at both front and back, all around the house. He heard Cornell call him.

"Mr. Smith! Come here! I want you to meet my niece."

Grant went into the living room, winding around among those blue-clad figures.

"Jane," Cornell said heartily, "Mr.

Smith. Miss Mulholland, a niece of mine just out from the East, Mr. Smith."

"How do you do, Miss Mulholland," said Grant. He had a queer feeling that he might topple over on his face as he bowed.

"How do you do, Mr. Smith," she returned coldly and did not offer her hand.

GRANT held his breath. Did she recognize him? She had seen him only once, and in spite of her cool manner she must have been nervous and excited then. Cornell waved to the table where two laborers were bustling around, helping the women with this unaccustomed crowd. Mostly soldiers were eating at this first setting of the table.

"Right here, Smith, beside Jane. Give you the place of honor because we don't often have civil engineers out in this wild country. You two should get along well."

Courteously, Grant pulled out her chair, and pushed it back as she seated herself. She said, "Thank you," in a low voice, without turning to look at him. He was beginning to breathe again. She had not recognized him as the man who had held up the stage, so she couldn't tell the troopers who he was.

"Bread, Miss—Mulholland, wasn't it?" Grant asked with extreme politeness.

Now, for the first time, she looked full at him. "Mulholland, yes," she answered levelly. "Though some have called me—Miss Yankee."

Her lips curled in contemptuous, loathing and she drew over to the far edge of her chair. Then suddenly she got up and said abruptly, "Uncle Jim, I think I'll wait. The men are hungry and I've lost my appetite."

"Why, Jane!" With a piece of meat impaled on his fork, Cornell looked at his niece keenly.

"I can wait," Jane repeated and went sweeping from the room, out through the front door. There were still many blue-clad men out there; the long table could not hold all of them at one time. Grant saw the girl go straight to one who had come late and was just dismounting. It was Captain Montgomery! This was his troop! And then girl and officer moved to one side, out of Grant's line of vision. She was telling Montgomery that the Kit Fox was in there. The men outside would be loosening their guns to be ready for him!

CHAPTER VI

SHOT DOWN

GRANT split a biscuit and buttered it. He forced some food into his mouth and tried to swallow, but somehow it did not want to go down. He was in about the worst predicament of his life, and there seemed to be no possible way out of it. Half the troopers were still outside, but Grant found that it was not the soldiers he feared so much as Jim Cornell's cowboys. They were the toughest looking crew he had ever seen.

He judged that so long as he sat pretending to eat, nothing would happen. That gave him a little time to think. But on the other hand it was giving Captain Montgomery time to think, too, and an opportunity to throw his troopers around the house and behind the other adobes. It was a question of whether to attempt an escape now or later, with the chances—if there were any—mounting rapidly against him. He remained sitting to post-

Continued on page 108

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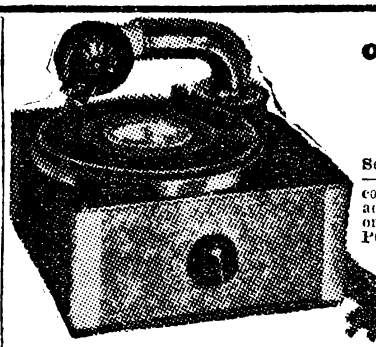

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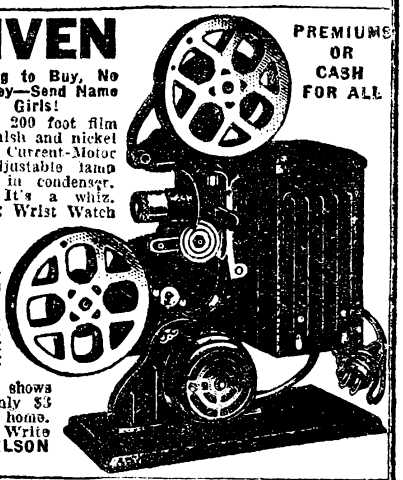

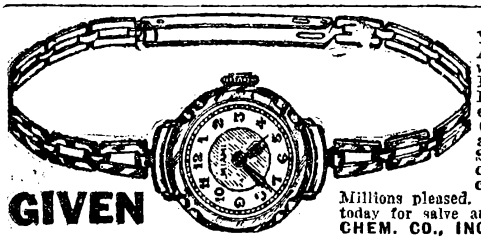

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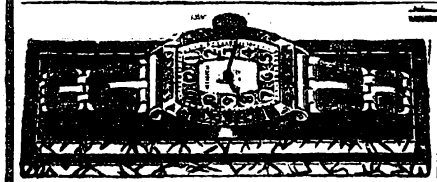

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Continued from page 106

pone the inevitable as long as possible.

Men were eating quickly to make room for the next tableful. As soon as one got up, another came in and took his place. Grant waited as long as he very well could, but at last pushed his chair back and stood up. Usually reckless and laughing in a tight spot, he looked serious now. Perhaps that was because this situation was so hopeless. He was thinking that he had come to the end of his trail and while he wasn't exactly afraid, he wasn't overly happy about it.

Doña Bianca had not eaten at the first table; she was walking around busily but majestically, supervising things. She spoke to Grant and he answered without knowing what he said. He rolled a cigarette, strolled to a front window. He had no idea of how cool he looked, how casual. Looking out, he saw that somebody had led Star from the hitching rack completely out of sight. Then it was that Grant's heart really went down.

Calmly, he made up his mind not to be taken alive. That would likely mean hanging for him, perhaps on one of the cottonwoods out by the irrigation ditches. There was very little law in Arizona, but what there was, was prompt and efficient, with no quibbling lawyers, and Grant was indubitably a bandit.

He started back into the room away from the window, and as he did so Captain Montgomery came in the door. Hardly knowing why, Grant turned quickly so that the captain could not see his face. He went strolling down the long room, calmly smoking his cigarette, and into the kitchen. He did not look around. He knew that an army officer could not shoot him in the back, that Montgomery would have to call a command to stop. But strangely it did not come.

Grant moved through the kitchen and out through the rear door. There were horses everywhere, and soldiers, and Cornell's cowboys. He strolled toward the best horse in sight, a J Bar W, not an army horse. He reached out and placed his hand on its neck. If he could throw himself into the saddle he might have a chance in a hundred.

But a voice back of him said, "Not a bad cayuse, mine."

Grant pivoted slowly and nodded to the cowboy, a wild-looking young fellow with the tip of his left ear shot away, such a young man as could be found nowhere but in Arizona Territory.

"Just what I was thinking," Grant nodded. "Should be fast."

"Uh-huh."

The man wore two guns and hadn't removed them nor his wide, ragged chaps. Grant started walking again, away from the house. Fifty yards off was an irrigation ditch, the banks lined with tall willows. A gate ran through these willows, and a rough wooden bridge crossed the ditch into an alfalfa field. If he could get behind those bushes, he could do—what? Not much so long as he was afoot. But he kept walking.

The bridge came closer and closer and still no one called out. He was permitted to open the gate and go through. He was thinking that there were six cartridges in the gun under his shirt, and that was all he had.

Closing the gate, he heard the squeak of a saddle ahead. So that was it—there were men lying there waiting for him to kill him out of sight of the house and the women. He paused a moment, leaning on the

gate. He took the cigarette from his mouth and blew a puff of smoke into the air. He was thinking that if he started back, they'd shoot him as soon as he turned. Quietly, he faced the field, began walking again. There came the click of boards under his boot heels.

And there, in the middle of the bridge, he stopped stock-still. The cigarette fell from his fingers. There stood Star, saddled as he had left him, but with the bit in his mouth now, and the bridle on. And both his gun belts still hung on the saddle horn. And Jane Mulholland, white as a sheet, stood holding the reins.

Grant forced himself to walk slowly while he could be seen through the gap in the willows, then he ran to her.

"Miss Mulholland—what does this mean?" he gasped.

"Get on him!" she choked. "Ride!"

"But—why?"

She was trembling violently, but it was with anger. She held out the ends of the reins stiffly, and he took them. He asked again, "Why did you do it?"

She suddenly spilled words in a bitter torrent: "Oh, it's not for you, you thief and murderer! It's that Uncle Jim would hang you immediately if he found out who you are, and . . . and I couldn't stand it. I led your horse away when I saw the troop coming."

A girl's queasy conscience had perhaps saved Grant! He felt contempt for her, for her treachery to her uncle. There was no occasion to thank her for she had not done this for him, but to save her own thin-skinned feelings. He smiled at her almost sarcastically; with Star's reins in his hand, his usual recklessness returned.

"And you once tried to hold me for these same soldiers, and tried to shoot me yourself," he mocked.

"I—didn't understand then. This wild, terrible country! Hanging you—a rope around your neck—" She shuddered, one hand to her face.

"What if they find out you did this? Oh, yes! And you rushed out to hold the captain, so that he would not recognize me. What if they find out?"

"I don't care!"

"Better care! You don't know this country yet. You might as well be dead as trying to live it down."

"Are you going, you copperhead?" she cried.

"Ladies first," he said with mock gallantry. "I think I noticed a bridle gate farther down in these willows. I'll wait here until you're through there, so that you won't be connected with this. But hurry, please."

He removed his hat and bowed. She opened her mouth to speak, but anger seemed to choke her. She turned quickly and went hurrying off, her skirts swishing through the alfalfa.

Grant looked through the screen of willows. He saw Captain Montgomery and Cornell standing just outside the rear door. They were talking rapidly, excitedly. He heard Cornell call to the cowboy who had spoken to him.

"Ed, where did that fellow go, that tall fellow that rode up here this evening?"

"Out into the alfalfa, through the big gate," Ed answered.

Another quick word or two between the captain and Cornell. Probably Montgomery had partly recognized Grant Horton's back, and they were settling the matter of who he was. They weren't yet sure, for Cornell called loudly, "Boys! Mount

quick and ride into the field. Bring that fellow back so we can find out who he is."

Montgomery called a similar order to the troopers. Men were mounting everywhere, but as yet there was no real excitement. Grant looked over his shoulder. The girl had heard and she was running now. He waited until he saw her leap the irrigation ditch opposite the small gate. Then he swung into the saddle on Star. This brought his head and shoulders above the willows.

"Grant Horton!" yelled Montgomery.

"Better known as the Kit Fox!" Grant laughed and waved a hand as he whirled his horse.

GRANT was flushed now, excited, and whatever worry he had felt was gone. Then he was racing, low in the saddle, across the field, and riders came pouring through that bottleneck of the bridge and scattered out behind in pursuit. A few rifle bullets sang over him but most were firing revolvers as they rode. It seemed that they wanted to take him alive if possible —to hang him. In the wild excitement, they appeared to have forgotten that numbers meant little, that one man on the fastest horse can get away from an army.

Ahead lay a high fence. Star rose to it beautifully and took it at full speed. But while he was high in the air above it, a terrible pain stabbed suddenly through Grant's side. Perhaps he jerked his body, perhaps the impact of the heavy lead bullet threw him off balance. He went sprawling off up there, out on his face to strike the ground with a heavy thud.

Vaguely, blindly, Grant saw Star come to a stop a few yards away. That pain was terrible, and blood was spurting fast. They'd got him with a stray bullet. He twisted in agony to his knees, pulled one revolver, and aimed. When he fired he saw a cowboy leave his saddle and plunge to the ground. A soldier clutched at his chest and leaned out, out, until he had one arm around the neck of his horse, which was circling and stopping. The soldier slid to the ground, staggered a step, collapsed.

They were mostly Cornell's cowboys in the lead; their cow ponies were much faster for a short distance than the army horses. But they didn't have the discipline of soldiers. They turned off, crossed the fence out of range, in order to encircle the wounded man.

It was then Grant leaped up and ran. It was a slow, staggering run, and every step was torture. His side was thickly covered with blood as he climbed heavily into the saddle.

"Star! Star, take me out of it!" he mumbled.

Possibly the heavy scent of warm blood frightened the horse; perhaps he vaguely realized his master's danger. Anyway, his belly sank and he went from a standing start into a dead run. Never had he run so; the wind could not catch him, it seemed.

Looking dizzily back, Grant saw cowboys flinging themselves from their saddles, tearing down the fence for no cow pony is trained to jump. The troopers were clearing the rails; one of them had fallen off somehow, and a horse had fallen with another. That was Montgomery's horse that had fallen! The man was lying still, and two or three soldiers were leaping off beside him.

But the rest of the troop were coming on, and now the cowboys were through the gap they had made and were passing the soldiers. Grant

Continued on page 112

A Money-Making Opportunity

for Men of Character

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One man in California earned over $1,600 per month for three months—close to $5,000 in 90 days' time. Another writes from Delaware—"Since I have been operating (just a little less than a month of actual selling) and not the full day at that, because I have been getting organized and had to spend at least half the day in the office; counting what I have sold outright and on trial, I have made just a little in excess of one thousand dollars profit for one month." A man working small city in N. Y. State made $10,805 in 9 months. Texas man nets over $300 in less than a week's time. Space does not permit mentioning here more than these few random cases. However, they are sufficient to indicate that the worthwhile future in this business is coupled with immediate earnings for the right kind of man. One man with us has already made over a thousand sales on which his earnings ran from $5 to $60 per sale and more. A great deal of this business was repeat business. Yet he had never done anything like this before coming with us. That is the kind of opportunity this business offers. The fact that this business has attracted to it such business men as former bankers, executives of businesses—men who demand only the highest type of opportunity and income—gives a fairly good picture of the kind of business this is. Our door is open, however, to the young man looking for the right field in which to make his start and develop his future.

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but a valuable, proved device which has been sold successfully by business novices as well as seasoned veterans.

Make no mistake—this is no novelty—no flimsy creation which the inventor hopes to put on the market. You probably have seen nothing like it yet—perhaps never dreamed of the existence of such a device—yet it has already been used by corporations of outstanding prominence—by dealers of great corporations—by their branches—by doctors, newspapers, publishers—schools—hospitals, etc., etc., and by thousands of small business men. You don't have to convince a man that he should use an electric bulb to light his office instead of a gas lamp. Nor do you have to sell the same business man the idea that some day he may need something like this invention. The need is already there—the money is usually being spent right at that very moment—and the desirability of saving the greatest part of this expense is obvious immediately.

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You walk into an office and put down before your prospect a letter from a sales organization showing that they did work in their own office for $11 which formerly could have cost them over $200. A building supply corporation pays our man $70, whereas the bill could have been for $1,600! An automobile dealer pays our representative $15, whereas the expense could have been over $1,000. A department store has expense of $88.60, possible cost if done outside the business being well over $2,000. And so on. We could not possibly list all cases here. These are just a few of the many actual cases which we place in your hands to work with. Practically every line of business and every section of the country is represented by these field reports which hammer across dazzling, convincing money-saving opportunities which hardly any business man can fail to understand.

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Going into this business is not like selling something offered in every grocery, drug or department store. For instance, when you take a $7.50 order, $5.83 can be your share. On $1,500 worth of business, your share can be $1,167.00. The very least you get as your part of every dollar's worth of business you do is 67 cents—on ten dollars' worth $6.70, on a hundred dollars' worth $67.00—in other words two thirds of every order you get is yours. Not only on the first order—but on repeat orders—and you have the opportunity of earning an even larger percentage.

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Nor do you have to know anything about high-pressure selling. "Selling" is unnecessary in the ordinary sense of the word. Instead of hammering away at the customer and trying to "force" a sale, you make a dignified, business-like call, leave the installation—whatever size the customer says he will accept—at our risk, let the customer sell himself after the device is in and working. This does away with the need for pressure on the customer—it eliminates the handicap of trying to get the money before the customer has really convinced himself 100%. You simply tell what you offer, showing proof of success in that customer's particular line of business. Then leave the invention without a dollar down. It starts working at once. In a few short days, the installation should actually produce enough cash money to pay for the deal, with profits above the investment coming in at the same time. You then call back, collect your money. Nothing is so convincing as our offer to let results speak for themselves without risk to the customer! While others fail to get even a hearing, our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They have received the attention of the largest firms in the country, and sold to the smallest businesses by the thousands.

No Money Need Be Risked

in trying this business out. You can measure the possibilities and not be out a dollar. *If you are looking for a business that is not overcrowded*—a business that is just coming into its own—on the upgrade, instead of the downgrade—a business that offers the buyer relief from a burdensome, but unavoidable expense—a business that has a prospect practically in every office, store, or factory into which you can set foot—regardless of size—*that is a necessity* but does not have any price cutting to contend with as other necessities do—that because you control the sales in exclusive territory is your own business—*that pays more on some individual sales than many men make in a week and sometimes in a month's time*—if such a business looks as if it is worth investigating, *get in touch with us at once* for the rights in your territory—don't delay—because the chances are that if you do wait, someone else will have written to us in the meantime—and if it turns out that you were the better man—we'd both be sorry. So for convenience, *use the coupon below*—but send it right away—or wire if you wish. But do it now. *Address*

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Continued from page 110

put his horse up the hillside toward the line of cedars. He was swaying in his saddle, barely able to keep his seat, and the leather under him was slippery with blood.

That wild young fellow with the good horse was far ahead of the others. He was gaining on Grant. He had emptied his gun and he was reloading it as he rode. Grant fired back at him, missed, fired again. The cowboy dropped his gun and reeled. The last Grant saw of him he had turned his horse and was riding slowly back, hunched over his saddle-horn.

And then Grant was in the cedars. He thrust his gun in the holster and clutched his side, trying to stop the flow of blood. He was going blind but still he pushed Star to his limit. From the top of the bridge, he looked back. With a downhill run now, he had won the race; if he could only keep his saddle at all. He would have to circle and watch his trail, for Apache trackers would be with the troop. He rode hard for half an hour, hearing occasional distant yells behind, but the yells were veering off after he turned.

Finally Grant came to a long, stony wash. He slipped from his saddle, fell, got up again. He managed to take short horseshoe pinchers from the saddlebags and, painfully, pulled the shoes from Star. He put them into the saddlebags, fell twice trying to mount, but at last he led Star beside a bank and got on from there. Hunched painfully in the saddle, rocking stupidly, he managed to keep to the wash, where tracks of unshod hoofs would not show. Even then he knew that he would have to keep on going, going, in a great circle. Once he stopped roughly to bandage his side with his torn shirt. He didn't dare dismount to do it, for he knew that he could never mount again.

That night Clay Horton sat reading by the cold fireplace of the CT cabin. He heard a horse approach the cabin in a slow walk—a loose, barefooted horse. He thought he heard a slumping sound, but was not sure. Presently, when the horse did not go away, he absently went out to look around. He stumbled over something soft just outside the door. A dead man!

He turned and ran a step or two, to shout around the corner of the cabin to the tired cowboys sleeping in the bunkhouse. But he thought better of it; he hurried back and brought a lamp from the cabin, turned the figure over. A ghastly white face stared sightlessly up at him.

"Grant!" he gasped. "Good God!"

Clay dragged his brother inside. He heard a feeble groan, and knew that Grant was not yet dead. He got him into the bunk. Then he re-bandaged the terrible wound, forced a little wiskey between the white lips, and after a while Grant's eyes began to move, to follow him feebly. Clay bent down.

"Grant, lie still till I get back. I'm going to send a cowboy for a doctor. It's an eighty-mile ride."

He had to lean closer to catch the whisper that came back. "No. No! No doctor . . . might tell. They'd take the ranch. The ranch . . . yours now."

"But Grant—"

"No! Hundred . . . sixty miles, both ways. Likely . . . be too late and . . . and ruin you. No . . . kick." And he was unconscious again.

It was not his arguments so much as the uselessness of it that kept Clay from sending for a doctor. All that night he sat by his brother,

moistening his lips with water, mixed with a little whiskey. He said nothing to the cowboys about a man's being there. Toward morning he hid Star in the cedars, and when the coyboys got back that evening he told them he had found the black straying, saddled, in the hills.

On the second night, with Grant still alive, he cursed himself for not having sent for a doctor—but now it was too late. Grant was raving feverishly and in his delirium thought that he was a child again, back on the plantation in Georgia before the War ruined it. Clay knew he couldn't last until morning.

The next day Clay slept for the first time. He had fought sleep until his eyes were hollow and burning, and his head reeled. He dropped off in his chair by the bedside, his head against the wall. It was pitch dark when he woke up. He gave a moan of self-accusation and with shaking fingers lit the lamp. With it in his hand, he crossed to the still figure on the bed sure that his brother would be dead.

He stared down at the white face with its eyes closed. And then as the light struck them the eyes slowly opened. The pale lips parted in a weak grin and Grant whispered, "Clay, the Kit . . . Fox . . . is a tough nut. Couldn't kill him with . . . a cannon."

Clay groaned, and tears rolled down his face into his beard. He rushed to the fireplace to boil more water, to change the bandages.

CHAPTER VII

MONTGOMERY CALLS

ON the second evening after that, just before sunset, Clay stepped outside the cabin for a breath of air, but in a moment he plunged back through the door.

"Soldiers!" he yelled. "They're coming down the ridge, heading this way! They know you're here!"

Grant turned his pallid face and a trace of color flowed into it. He said quietly, "Hand me both my guns," Clay. You—get out."

Clay got the weapons quickly and threw them, with the full cartridge belts, on the bed. But he did not leave the room. He reached down a long old rifle from its pegs on the wall and hurriedly took a box of cartridges from a shelf.

For once Clay Horton looked resolute; the bond between the brothers, different as they were, had always been close. Clay had good stuff in him, although it was far milder stuff than that of which Grant was made. He turned, and the quiet determination in his voice surprised Grant.

"Let them come!" he said. "I've fought Yankees before."

Grant watched with keen interest the sudden display of firmness in his brother. He smiled gently and said, "Help me into the storeroom—hide me. That'll give us a few minutes while they're hunting for me."

The soldiers were still half a mile off, coming down a bare brown hillside scattered with cedars, but they were not riding fast. Clay swept all the top blankets off Grant and disappeared with them into the storeroom. The place was hardly larger than a big box, and it was very dark, there being no window. He came back quickly.

"Stay relaxed. I'll carry you."

He took his younger brother in his arms and despite the wooden foot, carried him inside and laid him on the blankets. A quick glance showed him that the bandages had not been torn loose. He went out, came in again, with blankets to put

Jim Crowley

KNOWS AND TELLS

FOOTBALL

HOW does a coach recognize that a bruising fullback would make a better tackle?

If your star back was suddenly crippled, what would you do?

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JIM CROWLEY knows and tells the answers to these and many other vital problems facing a football coach. This informative article appears in the October

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over Grant. He touched his shoulder gently.

"You lie still, Grant. Let me handle 'em."

"No. I'll—help."

Grant now was weakly shoving cartridges out of the belts and piling them on the blankets close to hand. He looked up once, looked at Clay as though he had never seen him before. In fact, this sort of Clay he never had seen before.

Clay went running out. He started around the cabin to rout out the cowboys, but he saw them outside already, standing in a group watching the coming soldiers. They were nearly all Texans—Southerners.

"Boys, they're coming to try to run it over on us!" Clay called to them. "They're staying at Cornell's place. That shows where they stand."

Uncertainly, one at a time, the men were turning, going through the door of the bunkhouse, coming back with their guns buckled on. They were talking in low tones, and they did not look much like fight. If Cornell's cowboys had come over, it would have been very different, but this was a little fragment of the United States army. They did not want to get into trouble with the army, especially for such a weak leader as Clay Tracy. Clay saw them hanging back in a group, and his heart sank. His rifle in the crook of his arm, he nervously watched the approaching detachment of eighteen soldiers.

And so they stood, the cowboys over by the bunkhouse, Clay at the cabin doorway, when the troopers clattered up and stopped. Captain Montgomery was in the lead, on a fine bay; he looked spick-an-span, and very stiff and military.

"You're Tracy," he asked civilly, "the owner of this ranch?"

A beard is a wonderful thing to hide a man's face. Clay was scared

because of his brother. But he was so badly scared that he had reached the stage of utter desperation—and it has always been an adage in the West that no man is so dangerous as one in that state. He would not let them take Grant!

"Mr. Tracy to you, sir," he answered shortly.

The cowboys' mouths flew open. Never had they heard Clay speak this way, firmly, with a mocking note in his soft voice. Why, the man had *nerve!*

"Let's move up closer!" grunted a middle-aged Texas cowboy with a wide, reckless face. He started forward a step, but nobody followed him, so he stopped again to listen.

"Sir," asked Clay, "do you want something, or is this a social call?"

He was so stiffly polite that the middle-aged Texan—his name was Bat Willoughby—heard a low snigger from one of the men behind him. These Southern punchers had no love for Yankee soldiers.

Montgomery looked very dignified now. From his air, it was apparent that he was not only on a bay horse but on his high horse. He spoke formally: "I hear that you have Grant Horton's black horse, Star, on this ranch."

"Oh, so that's who owned that black I found! He was loose about five miles from here, with saddle and bridle still on. The saddle was caked with blood. Naturally, I led him home."

"I came to get him."

"Why?"

"Why, one of my men shot Horton."

"Does killing a man give you a right to his horse?" asked Clay innocently, his blue eyes wide. He mentioned killing to see what they knew.

This time a muffled guffaw came from the cowboys. There was no penalty for laughing at soldiers, so long as one went no further. Clay's eyes went past Montgomery's to his men. He was surprised to see grins breaking out on their faces, too, and to see one wink at another. Evidently they did not think too much of their captain. Grant had told him that Montgomery had never been popular with his men—he was too much of a stickler for little points of discipline that amounted to nothing, especially out here. Montgomery flushed slightly, and his eyes grew angry.

"Enough of this nonsense!" he said sternly. "You will please order your men to turn Star over to me immediately."

"I will, will I! Captain Montgomery, I shall gladly give him to you when you show civil papers demanding him. He's no army horse and you have no more right to him than I have."

Montgomery's flush was growing. He snapped, "See here, Tracy—"

"Mr. Tracy, suh. When a man comes trying to run what out here we call a sandy, I'd prefer that he called me mister."

Montgomery glared. Clay stood courteously, the long old rifle in the crook of his arm. Then the cowboys understood. Bat Willoughby said, a growl in his throat, "Come on, boys! Clay's right. They got no law behind 'em."

He started forward again. The others hesitated an instant, and then they followed. They grouped themselves close to Clay and just stood there. They did not look any too belligerent—but they were there. Montgomery seemed calm again, but he could not hide the fury in his eyes.

"Very well, *Mr.* Tracy," he bit out. "You are quite right. We have

no authority to seize the horse, but we'll get that authority as soon as possible. However, I don't see how you can stop me from searching the ranch for evidence as to whether Grant Horton, a man wanted for military offenses, has been here or not, or whether he's dead or not." He turned. "Dismount, men! Search the place. Begin with the cabin."

The color left Clay's face. But he went bravely forward a step and his right hand came up to the lock of the old rifle.

"Captain Montgomery, if one of your men dismounts, there's going to be serious trouble. In fact . . . er . . . I'll shoot you off your horse at the first move."

Montgomery went white, but it was purely with rage; he was no coward, whatever his failings. His voice trembled with fury as he shouted, "Think I'm afraid of you, Tracy?"

"No, suh, I know you're not. But I'd advise you to think it over before you start a fight with the crew of a cow ranch, without any authority. There would be an investigation that might look bad for you. You might even lose your commission."

Montgomery swept his eyes over the cowboys. Not a man of them had a gun drawn. They did not look as though they meant to draw, but he could not read those blank brown faces. A first shot fired, and anything might happen—and if someone were killed, the case would be tried before civil courts, not military. He glanced back at his troopers. They had not dismounted but were uneasily waiting for him to repeat the order. He said suddenly, "Let's go, men!" And, whirling his horse, he called to Clay, "We'll be back! With proper warrants!"

"Then I'll let you search the place. Good day, suh."

THEY went clattering off. Clay sat down weakly on the wooden bench beside the door. He placed the butts of the old rifle on the ground and let the barrel fall back between his knees. Sweat was suddenly pouring out all over his body, and his face felt cold. He was trembling. He felt a big hand whack down between his shoulder blades, and he heard Bat Willoughby's rough voice crowing, "Clay, we didn't know it was in you! You had us boys scared stiff. Bluffin' the army!"

"I wasn't bluffing."

Bat stood looking down on him in astonishment. He turned and started slowly to the bunkhouse, the others with him.

"Hey, Clay," one of them called back, "want to sit in on a little game with us?"

Never had they invited him into their card games before. He was surprised, not yet fully realizing what it meant. But his cowboys had at last accepted him as their social equal.

"Thanks, Dick," he called back, "but not tonight."

And for their part the punchers were not fully conscious of that new note in Clay's voice. A sort of stiffness that he had always used before in speaking to them was missing. It was coming to him that these men were not merely a wild pack of ruffians which the work forced him to keep around. They were—he was not sure what—but he suddenly found that he liked them. This was queer! Everything was queer and he could not understand it. He got up slowly and limped into the cabin.

"Clay!"

Continued on page 118

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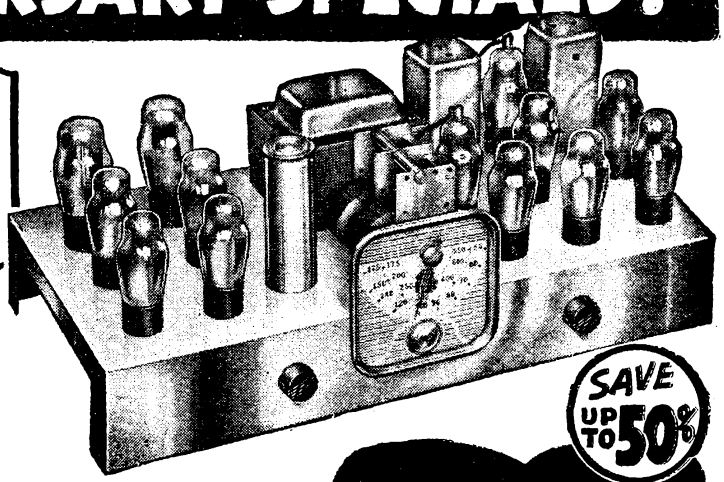

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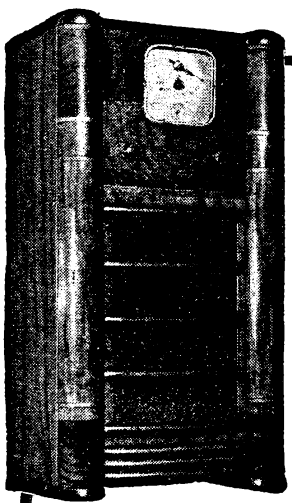

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Continued from page 116

He saw Grant lying back there with a weak hand out. He went forward and grasped it. They said nothing, but Grant's eyes kept following Clay around. Never could Grant forget this thing his gentle-natured brother had done.

Of course, Grant would have to be moved before Montgomery came back. And since wheel tracks would be easily followed, he would have to ride a barefooted horse. Clay saw the danger of it and sat with bowed head beside the sick man.

"Grant, it will kill—kill you."

"Can't—help it," Grant said. "Better than—hanging."

That was true. But if it would only rain! Those clouds had been gathering daily, and the rains were long overdue. This night they looked heavier and more threatening than usual. Hoping, hoping, they waited hour after hour. About one in the morning a gentle sprinkle began to spatter on the roof.

"We'll risk it," said Grant. "We'll lead Star behind, and if it doesn't get heavier I'll change to him. If we can get to Harper's place—their wagon—"

Clay stole to the corral and lead out a team, which he hitched to the buckboard. He saddled Star and tied him behind. And presently he carried Grant out and laid him on a thick bed of straw and blankets. Grant, after the excitement of the evening, had had a bad turn again. He was ashy white and his eyes were hot and feverish, but his head seemed clear. In a slow walk, so as not to wake the cowboys, Clay started driving off. Occasional distant lightning had been playing around. They had gone a mile when suddenly a livid sheet darted around them, and a deafening crash followed. Then, far off to the southwest came the low moan of cold wind approaching.

"Clay! Clay!" Grant's voice came weakly from back in the buckboard. Clay stopped the team, set the brake, and crawled hurriedly over the seat.

"Drive for it, Clay—run 'em!" whispered Grant. "It's coming. It'll wash out the wheel tracks."

"But, Grant, there's no road! You'll be tossed around so—"

"Only chance. Run 'em! Get—far off as you can—before it stops."

And when the full force of the storm broke presently, the whirling sheets of lightning showed a maddened, almost uncontrolled team dashing wildly across ridges, down draws, a led horse running behind. The buckboard careened and tossed, and often only a miracle seemed to keep it from turning over.

Back under the tarp Grant lay moaning in agony, clawing with weak hands to try to steady himself. The bandages were loosening, blood was trickling down and staining the blankets, and his head was reeling.

Up on the swaying seat, legs braced, the bearded man drove like a Jehu. He swung his blacksnake whip, for he could not shout to the team—there was a lump in his throat that would not let him. With wide, frightened blue eyes he tried to get the lay of the roadless ridges ahead in those brilliant flashes, but it was mostly blind guesswork. The rain beat furiously, mingling with the tears running down his face. He was killing the brother he loved—killing him—killing him. Every thud of the horses' hoofs in the mud kept saying that.

NEXT night Clay returned home and it rained heavily again. At daylight a shout woke him up. He found Captain Montgomery outside, with his whole

troop now, and a deputy sheriff. They had a search warrant, but Clay did not ask to see it. Dully, he let them search. The black? Stolen, he said stupidly, and they could not disprove it. He sat on the bench outside the door with his beard sunk on his chest.

Ten days later they called again at dawn. They closed in from all sides at once to surprise him. Again Clay let them search without question. But this time he helped them, and ordered his cowboys to help. Soldiers and cowboys mixed, and sometimes one or the other would gravely open a baking-powder can or something of the sort and peer in, and look up as though distressed at not finding a black horse in it. Cowboys and troopers got to winking at each other when the captain was not looking, and to grinning slightly. The thing was taking on a comic air.

Clay was courteous and all too helpful, and now he had a mocking light in his lively blue eyes. He had just had a letter from Thurlow Baxter, the man who backed the outfit. Baxter was at The Needles, just over the California line. He said that he had intended to come to the ranch to see how things were, but he had been sick with the grippe a day or two—out of his head. However, he was much better now and was returning home to San Francisco to recuperate. He would come later.

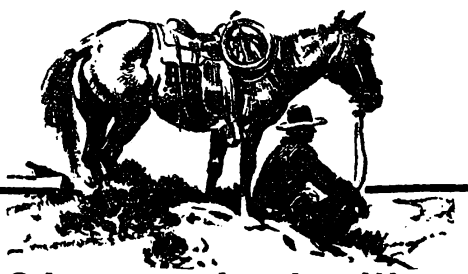
The grave Clay seldom joked, but as Montgomery left, he said to him affably, "Sho' glad you people dropped in to visit. Come back sometime when you ain't got nothin' to do and feel like it."

Montgomery said nothing in return. He just rode off ahead of his men, very stiff and military and handsome-looking on his fine bay. Mentally, he was in turmoil. He knew that this soft-spoken Southerner had, somehow, tricked him, and about something more important than a mere black horse. And it was not hard to suspect what it was. He had, this time, found fairly fresh bloodstains on some blankets hidden in the little storeroom. He was not sure, but—was the Kit Fox alive? Had he eluded him again?

CHAPTER VIII

BLACKIE LINDSEY STRIKES!

HIS San Francisco bankers knew that Thurlow Baxter, the young Arizona cattleman, was in town. His checks came in frequently and had been coming in for a month when the man himself appeared, on a warm, sunny day.



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They were shocked at his appearance. He was thin as a ghost, with trembling hands and knees, and his face was drawn and pasty. Pneumonia, he said—barely pulled through it.

But from that first day out of his room he improved rapidly. Modestly though he lived, he was so obviously a gentleman that soon he was being invited to the best homes. Everybody liked him, for as his strength returned, so did his quiet, dry sense of humor. The young ladies adored him; along with his courteous manner, he had a daredevil air that appealed to them. He liked them too—all of them—which was the vexatious trouble. He didn't like any one of them in particular. Their fathers laughed about it, though no one of them would have objected if Thurlow Baxter had singled his daughter out for attention. Young gentlemen whom they could trust implicity to escort their daughters were all too scarce in the city.

Four months and he was fully recovered, his step as light as ever and his head as high. He was so popular with the younger set that a little delegation went to see him off on the stage. He was presumably going on business to that up-and-coming little town of Los Angeles, down south. But at Los Angeles Thurlow Baxter vanished, and before daylight next morning young Jefferson Cole took a stage going East and there was a strange resemblance between the two, in spite of different clothes.

The journey through the Mohave Desert was a horror; it was too hot to push the horses fast, and an oven could not have been hotter than the baked inside of the coach. The handsome young Southerner seemed to stand the heat better than the others, but even he kept a handkerchief in his hand, mopping a face from which the sweat was baked away before it had well appeared.

At last, in the worst of that terrific heat, sharp, odd peaks appeared ahead—the Needles. The young Southerner's eyes lighted as he saw them, for they meant he'd soon be in Arizona. Grant's heart seemed to lift in his chest. For the first time he realized fully how he had come to love that wild, uncivilized stretch of country; it was his home, the only land that he could ever again call home. Soon they were crossing the Colorado River and were in Arizona.

At a station where they changed horses, the agent looked troubled. He whispered something to the driver and guard, and Grant caught the words "Blackie Lindsey's gang." So Blackie was around. Grant began to feel troubled, too. He knew that Lindsey would never forgive him for what he had done to him. It would not be so much the humiliation of getting ahead of him in robbing that other stage as that he had had the sublime impudence to go through Blackie's pockets and relieve him of his valuables. Like most of his kind, Lindsey had a high sense of his own importance.

The stage rumbled on again, swaying through its own dust. Grant remembered the planted guard on the other stage, remembered that Blackie himself had been on it under another name. He surveyed the passengers. There was a Catholic priest, reading his breviary through thick glasses. His wrinkled brown face told that not only was he at least half Mexican, but that he had spent most of his life in the deserts. He was, no doubt, returning to his mission.

There was a fat mining man with a very heavy gold watch chain across his ornate waistcoat. A crook he

was, a wildcatter, judging by appearances, but his jowls did not hint of nerve enough for him to be in the Lindsey gang. There was only one other passenger, a man who had been helped on dead-drunk at the last station, and propped in a corner opposite Grant. He was a young cowboy with a very broad and red face; Grant had heard the agent tell the driver to shove him off opposite Tierney's ranch, and let him walk from there when he'd sobered up.

Grant inspected this young fellow. His clothes were startling, to say the least; some slick tradesman had evidently sold him the suit as the last word from back East. It was new, but already it was a mass of wrinkles, and the color had faded to a bilious green check. Grant wished that cowboys would stick to their own dress and not try to look like city men, and thereby make clowns of themselves. He had seen green Easterners don cowboy dress with equally ludicrous results; their unwrinkled eyes, their soft stomachs, their heavy legs did not go with the outfit, even if they did manage to acquire a faint tan. They, too, were clowning and did not know it.

But the question in his mind was whether this young fellow was as drunk as he seemed to be. Grant made out the bulge of a gun under the sagging coat, but could not tell if he had another on the opposite side. Grant had gathered that driver and guard were old hands of the coach company; they both looked honest and capable. Again inspecting the cowboy, he decided that he really was drunk; he would not be actor enough to put on that loose, idiotic expression. So Lindsey had nobody planted on the stage this time. If he tried to stick it up at all, it would be openly, with his gang. And if he did, and found the Kit Fox on it, it would go hard with his enemy. Grant surrep-

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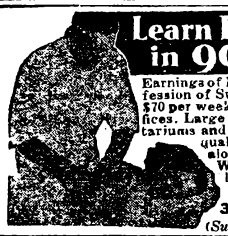

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titiously felt the two big revolvers under his coat, which he wore in spite of the heat.

They were climbing rolling brown hills now, with a little sparse grass on them. Grant saw an occasional small band of cattle, wild as deer. Thinly stocked, this would be fairly good range.

"Hey, Mr. Cole," the driver called down to him, "that puncher awake? We'll soon be at Tierney's place."

"I'll have him ready, if I can," Grant shouted back.

He thrust his head out the window and looked ahead. Across a valley he could see smoke, and could make out buildings. Half a mile ahead, a great cloud of dust arose where cowboys were driving a small herd toward the ranch. They did not seem to be aware of the coach coming behind, for they were letting the cattle follow the road where it was easy to drive them.

The stage rumbled on, and presently the driver lifted his voice in an irate shout.

"Hey, you punchers! Git them critters off the road!"

"Who owns this road, anyway?" a faint answer came back. "Go round us!"

The driver swore. He swung his whip, and put the horses to a lope. An angry yell came from ahead.

"Turn out! You'll stampede 'em!"

"Hope I do!"

The stage careened into the dust of the herd. His handkerchief to his nose, Grant continued to look out. Long-horned, wild-eyed cattle were breaking in all directions, noses in the air. The driver cursed feelingly.

And then, without warning, the cowboys had closed around the coach, paying no attention to the cattle.

"Throw 'em up!" came a harsh order. "This is a stick-up!"

LINDSEY'S voice! He had gathered a few head of cattle grazing around to give the appearance of a drive—another of his ruses!

It was too late for the guard and driver to do anything but throw their hands up. Nobody had had a suspicion until they were closely surrounded. Nobody but Grant, and his had come almost too late. Quickly, he pulled both his guns; he would be able to get some of them, and perhaps allow the guard to recover himself and take a hand. He cast a last glance across at the drunken cowboy, still sleeping, and turned to the window.

Then something hard shoved into the back of his neck and a voice hissed, "Up weet 'em! Queek!"

Grant quietly drew back his hands, dropped the guns beside him on the seat, raised his arms. He turned to see the mock priest grinning wickedly at him—he had never suspected the man, had not given him a second glance. There came a drawling voice from outside as a horseman rode close.

"Howdy, Grant. One of my men recognized you back at Wauloo station, and rode ahead to tell me. I told you I'd see you again! Come on out."

"Believe I will, Blackie," said Grant coolly.

He climbed out and stood ankle deep in the dust of the road. Blackie was looking evilly at him. Now, in dusty cowboy dress, he was a very different Blackie from the dandy whom Grant had robbed not so long ago. He had a week's growth of black beard, and he looked tougher than any of the dozen with him.

"You, Fatty, out and line up. Come off the seat, boys. Nothing personal against you, just line up here."

The half-breed had discarded his glasses and was pulling off his black robe. One of the bandits spoke to him.

"Tony, we got yore horse over the ridge. You can ride behind me that far."

The others were rapidly going through the mining man; they found surprisingly little for one so well-dressed. They turned to driver and guard, and Blackie himself dismounted and came forward.

"Boys, I'll take Grant Horton myself. There's a little score to settle. What you got, Grant?"

A roll of five hundred dollars came from Grant's pocket. Blackie chuckled delightedly and thrust it into his own.

"Now, your watch."

He reached for it. Grant's face flamed; he would not part with that watch. His arm came down with a corkscrew motion, and up again. His fist cracked into Blackie Lindsey's jaw.

"Damn you!" Blackie swore, but Grant leaped after him and struck again and Blackie went down. He was trying to turn his gun up, to shoot, but Grant lunged for him.

It had all happened in a flash, and in that flash the guard whirled and grabbed his carbine from the coach roof. He fired bravely, missing in his haste, and pitched forward with a bullet through his brain.

Then the brief flurry was over; there could have been no other outcome. A dozen hands had hold of Grant Horton, dragging him to his feet. Blackie got up, white with dust from head to foot. His face was livid and he was shouting wild oaths.

"Hold him from the sides, boys!" he raved. "I'm gonna empty this into his belly!"

Grant struggled. He freed an arm

and knocked one man down, but others seized him. He was pitched back against a wheel, men on each side holding him there, themselves shrinking far back not to be shot. Blackie, his eyes wild with fury, raised his gun.

CHAPTER IX

UNDER ARREST

GRANT HORTON'S lips parted, and he laughed, laughed straight into the eyes of the man holding the gun. There was no fear on his face, nothing but amusement. With good reason had the Kit Fox been called a daredevil.

"Think I don't mean it!" spat Blackie Lindsey. His finger was starting to squeeze the trigger with the barrel aimed directly at the top button of Grant's trousers.

"Certainly you mean it," Grant laughed. "But you don't know how funny you look, red-faced and foaming. A fine gunman you are, Blackie! Have to get your gang to hold a man to give you time to get a shot in! Why, you cheap four-flusher!"

Still Blackie did not give that final squeeze to the trigger. He knew very well that Grant was trying to taunt him into letting him have his guns back, into giving him a chance to shoot it out.

"If you think I'm afraid of you, Grant, you'd better think again!" Blackie snapped. He was not afraid, obviously. He added, "I just take the easy way."

"Oh, stop talking and shoot, you tinhorn!" Grant looked at him with contempt. "I never was scared of a gun. It's the thought of hanging I never liked."

"Oh, so that's it!" A wicked grin came to Blackie's face. He turned to the driver and the others. "You get back on the coach. Get going—quick!"

They needed no second telling. It was hardly a moment until the coach was careening wildly down the road in its dust. Blackie nodded to his men.

"Jud, ride double with Spike. Put this fellow on the little dun."

Once more Grant managed to wrench his arms loose. This time he put up a mighty battle. He knocked two men down, and himself received a dozen wicked blows. Then he was held tightly again, and Blackie was prodding him with the point of a bowie knife, prodding so deeply that blood came.

"Going to mount, or not?" he asked. He twisted the point in.

"Believe I will," remarked Grant affably.

The nerve of the man was astonishing. He took hold of the horn and swung up, shook himself down in the saddle. Blackie came forward with a piece of small rope.

"Hold both your wrists against the saddlehorn," he commanded.

"Sure," Grant said. "Anything to be of help."

And suddenly his boot toe shot out and caught Blackie squarely on the jaw. Blackie went down, got up cursing. Grant had dived forward and tried to jerk the reins away from the man holding them, but his wrists were grabbed from both sides. Once more Blackie had his guns drawn and was almost dancing with rage.

"My wrists, did you say?" asked Grant calmly. "Let go of them, boys. I can't obey orders while you hold them."

"Let go," said Blackie, cocked gun poised.

Grant carefully placed one wrist against each side of the saddlehorn.

He knew now that Blackie would drill him on the slightest excuse.

"This all right?" he asked politely.

A man began to lash his wrists there, but before he was through another on the outer edge of the crowd said, "Somebody coming."

Grant looked down the road. Half a dozen men were riding toward them at a dead run. They were passing the stage without stopping, although probably some shouts were exchanged.

"Cowboys from the ranch," grunted Blackie. "Saw us driving the cattle and thought we were rustling them. Let 'em come. They won't argue with us."

Probably they wouldn't; half the Arizona cowboys had been outlaws themselves somewhere or other, and the rest were none too law-abiding. The men finished tying Grant's wrists and bound his ankles together under the horse's chest.

"Let's go, boys! We'll teach the Kit Fox something!" Blackie threw a hard grin toward Grant and swung into his saddle.

"What," asked Grant, "are you figuring on doing with me?"

"Want to know? Well, I'll tell you. We're gonna string you up higher'n hell! If it's the only thing you're afraid of, it's what you get."

"Higher than hell," mused Grant. "Why, Blackie, I always thought hell was low—down under us."

"Shut your lip!"

By this time the band of men was close. They were in cowboy garb and riding hard. Blackie turned and shouted to them: "You fellows get back and mind your own business! This is the Lindsey Gang!"

"Oh, is it?" The leader shouted and they came on.

"Get back, I say!" Blackie yelled, reaching for his gun.

"Well, this is the sheriff's gang, and I'm the sheriff," the leader called. "We heard you were around. Stick 'em up, all of you!"

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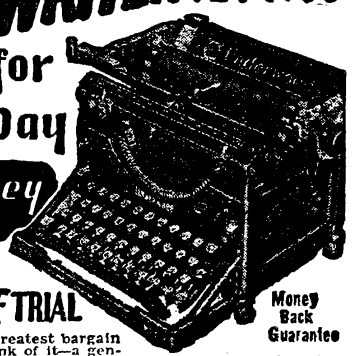

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with the sheriff and his deputies outnumbered two to one. There were no more words. A snarl came from Blackie. It seemed as though he and the sheriff drew at the same instant, fired together. But it was the sheriff who toppled dead from his saddle; he had paid the price of his courage. The horses had stopped when guns were half out.

"Hold it! Hold it!" shouted Blackie. "Let's talk it over."

The sheriff's men, leaderless now, paused. Blackie did most of the talking.

"Listen! We can get all of you—and we sure will if we have to. You're not taking us in. But killing a whole posse would stir up more talk than I want. You boys have some sense, and go back."

Two of them had dismounted to kneel beside the sheriff. One stood up, said flatly, "He's dead."

"And that's how all of you will be if you don't go back! How about it?"

"We . . . have to take him in."

"Come back and get him after we leave. We're not going to turn our backs to you."

The tension lessened. The leaderless deputies were going to do the only sane thing. They were picking up their reins. They eyed the bound man on the little dun.

"Who you got there?" asked one.

Suddenly Blackie laughed. "What would happen to the Kit Fox if you caught him?"

"A nice necktie party," said a deputy grimly.

"Well, here he is—and welcome to him."

"Blackie!" Grant jerked his head around, for the first time knowing fear. "We're both in the same game. You wouldn't be so low-down as to—"

"Here he is, boys! Show him a good time—I mean a high time." Blackie himself led the dun forward, and handed the reins to a deputy.

"Blackie, I'm warning you!" Grant said between set teeth. "I'll get you for this if I ever get loose again!"

"Sure is a nice day, Grant!" mocked Blackie. He looked pleased with himself and his cleverness. "All right, boys, get going."

THE deputies turned and rode off a couple of hundred yards, leading the dun. They stood their horses there until Blackie and his men had gone calmly over the ridge. Then they hurried back to the dead sheriff. In silence, they tied him in his saddle, face down across it. Grant was the first to speak, as they were starting slowly away.

"Boys, give me a gun, let me loose! We'll follow and get them."

"We know when we're beaten," muttered one with bent head. "And we're givin' you no gun nohow, Mr. Kit Fox."

"I mean it honestly, boys! Just give me a gun and let me follow them alone! I promise that I'll get Blackie or he'll get me. If I fail, I'll come in and give up."

"Oh, shore you will!" grunted one.

Grant saw that it was no use. He wanted to swear at them, to say what he thought of them, but he knew that it would be poor policy to antagonize these men. He was their prisoner. Mile after mile they jogged along through the heat, the sheriff's limp body swaying on the saddle. There was hardly any conversation. After several hours of riding, Grant turned to one of them.

"I wish," he said, "I had a smoke."

They muttered among themselves, and one rode close and untied the pigging string, freeing his wrists. His ankles were still fast and a man had the reins, leading his horse. There seemed no danger in freeing his hands so he could roll and light a cigarette. And he did not try to

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make a break yet; the longer he postponed it the more careless they would be. Nor did he attempt to talk to them. He did not want them noticing him any more than he could help.

The road swung far around the foothills of some rough mountains, but the deputies were taking a short cut that led over through a pass. Slowly they climbed, their horses panting, and at last reached the pass. It was so high that a few stunted piñons grew in it, wind-blown and twisted. These were the only trees of any size that they had seen, and a glimpse ahead showed that they would be the last, for another barren valley lay beyond. Grant saw the smoke of a little town not five miles off—the end of their journey.

The only trees—he would have to make his break here. Unarmed, he knew that he would be taking a very long chance, but even the longest chance was better than the certainty of hanging. The piñons were denser as they started down the north side of the pass. Grant leaned sidewise in his saddle, threw himself covertly off balance. The dun did not like this, did not understand it; not urged by spurs, he slowed up more and more, hung back on the reins until the man leading him was last. Grant slipped his knife from his pocket, opened it, and held it concealed in his right hand.

And then, passing a piñon, he suddenly dug his left spur in. Startled, the horse shied sidewise into the tree. A branch swept Grant's hat off. He grabbed at it, missed, and stooped low trying to get hold of it before it reached the ground. He failed. But in that moment when he was bent over he made a quick sweep of the pocket knife and then threw it into the bushes. He straightened instantly without even knowing how far he had cut through the rope holding his ankles.

"Hold on, you can't reach it!" growled the man leading the dun. "I'll get it for you."

Still holding the reins, he swung off. He picked up Grant's hat and handed it to him uncivilly. Grant had hoped the others would keep on, but they didn't. Worsted by Blackie, they were taking no chances of losing the Kit Fox. But in a moment they would be leaving the piñons. He had to make his break now or never!

He reached for the hat. But instead of taking it, his fingers shot out and closed on the man's wrist. He braced his knees against the horse's sides and kicked hard. A snap, and the rope gave way where he had cut it. He went tumbling out of the saddle on top of the man.

There was a brief flurry there on the ground, but the deputy had been taken completely off guard. He made the mistake of trying to drag his gun out instead of holding Grant. A big stone swung and cracked against his head, and he went limp.

"Back! I'll shoot to kill!" shouted Grant, and the other deputies knew that he meant it.

Grant seized the limp deputy up as a shield. With the man's gun he fired, and the first of the four horses to come tearing back went down, rolling—but the rider kicked loose unhurt.

"Stop!" he warned.

The fallen man had dived behind his fallen horse. The other three stopped. They had their guns out, raised, but they dared not shoot for fear of hitting their companion. Grant was covering them, but they did not seem afraid of that. They had plenty of nerve all right.

"Blackie got away from us," one

of them said grimly. "Damned if you're going to! Put that gun down!"

"Think I will!" Grant laughed sarcastically. "Maybe you'll get me—but not alive."

The men whispered quickly among themselves. Suddenly they whirled their horses, dividing, heading for the hillsides. They were trying to encircle him. Grant fired, and another horse went tumbling. He hated to kill the animals but hated worse to kill their riders. This man, too, kicked loose and took refuge behind his fallen mount. Grant had a bare instant to aim at a third horse, but he fired too quickly and missed. He could hear the two men still mounted plunging around him through the piñons, one on each side.

He dared not try to leap on the dun and dash off; those two behind the fallen horses would get him in the back. That was what they were expecting him to do therefore he would have to do something else. He did, in a flash.

The man he held was coming to. He dropped him and went running backward to the nearest big piñon. A shot came, and he fired at a hat above the side of a dead horse. A piece of the brim flipped off.

Then he was sheltered behind a tree trunk. He heard a bullet thud into it. And meanwhile, those two mounted men were crashing around to his rear. He was being encircled—he was already encircled. He knew he had to deal with those out in front first, but he did not want to kill them unless forced to; after all, they were only doing their duty—and nothing can cause such a furor as the killing of a law officer.

PICKING up a dry stick, he put his hat on it and edged it out. That old game didn't work. Nothing left but to take a chance on their quickness of aim. He darted his head out, the gun before it as

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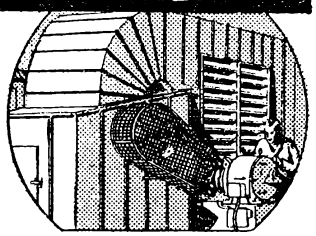

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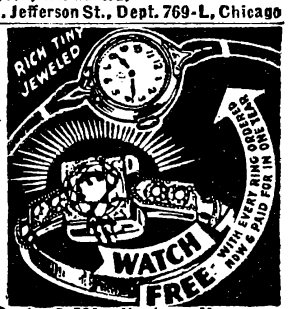

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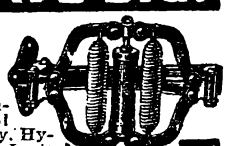

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if to fire, but hardly had it appeared before he jerked it back again. Bark flew against his face and for an instant he thought he had been hit. And then, before they could flip their guns and aim again, he beat them to it. His gun banged and a loud curse came from a man behind a horse where Grant's slug had burned a deep welt across his cheek.

This kept their heads down a moment. In that moment, Grant went running. Bullets came, but were too hurried to be accurate. Grant whirled and threw himself flat behind a stone; he was now well back in the trees where they could not see him so well.

"Watch him!" a shout came from front. "He's got farther back!"

Grant listened. He could not hear a sound. Evidently the two behind had dismounted to creep in. Peering through the branches, he saw a man—the man he had stunned—running as fast as he could, a carbine in his hand now. Grant fired at his legs. The man went rolling like a shot rabbit, but he leaped up and kept on, limping badly. Just as Grant was pressing the trigger again, a little volcano of sand spurted hard into the side of his face from a hidden man's slug.

His eyes full of sand, he whirled and fired at a man closing in from behind. He could hardly see the blurred sights at all and missed.

And suddenly he remembered that he had no cartridge belt, no spare cartridges. In the excitement he had forgotten that. He jerked the gun up and glanced at the front of the chambers. Only one gray-black bullet showed there! He was down to one last shot—and the five were closing in all around him!

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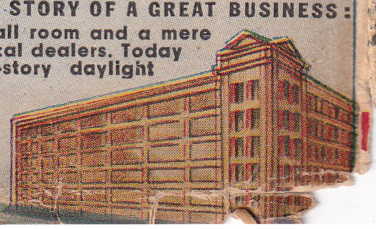
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